

# ISOLATED CHILDREN'S PARENT'S ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA (Inc.)

## FEDERAL COUNCIL

“Access to Education”

The Federal Council of the Isolated Children's Parent's Association of Australia [ICPA (Aust)] welcomes the opportunity to respond to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Primary Industries and Regional Services Inquiry into Infrastructure and the Development of Australia's Regional Areas.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary parent body dedicated to ensuring that all geographically isolated students have equality with their non-isolated peers of access to an appropriate education. Our Association comprises approximately 3300 plus member families, residing in the more remote parts of Australia, who all share a common concern of gaining access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this. Membership comprises a cross section of Australia's rural and remote population and includes fisherman, miners, itinerant employees, farmers, pastoralists and small business owners.

Living in these rural and remote areas of Australia it is felt there are three basic rights for these residents with those being:

- Access to education
- Access to health services
- Access to quality communications

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association (Aust) represents families who live in rural and remote parts of Australia and lobbies to ensure that the children of those families have access to a continuing and appropriate education (from Pre-School to Tertiary) . Consequently each of the following areas play an integral part in assisting our children to reach their individual potential;

- Country Areas Program
- Small Rural and Remote Schools
- Early Childhood Education
- Boarding Schools
- School Term Hostels
- Communications
- Special Education
- Curriculum
- Education Allowances
- Travel
- Post Compulsory (Tertiary) Education
- Distance Education

### EDUCATION ISSUES

In 1994 Sher and Sher ('Beyond the Conventional Wisdom: Rural Development as if Australia's Rural People and Communities Really Mattered' Journal of Research in Rural Education, Spring, 1994, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2-43) when asked to prepare a paper that would focus on strategies for advancing 'rural development', alerted those who cared to listen, to the fact that there was no rural development policy in place. Sher and Sher lamented that they could not find a single source that convincingly captured the realities of the Australia existing beyond the nations cities and suburbs.

Has the ensuing five years produced any improvement on this position?

Those of us who live and work in the less densely populated areas of Australia are acutely aware of the declining numbers of people who are prepared or committed to living 'west of the divide'. In order to appreciate some of the big issues that this country must confront, every encouragement should be given to people to at least spend some of their life living outside of our major cities. This means identifying the barriers that currently exist which discourages people, especially young people, from living in rural and remote Australia and develop strategies to overcome them.

## **Inquiry into Infrastructure and the Development of Australia's Regional Areas ICPA (Aust) Response**

Sustainable development comes from stable, progressive communities. For these communities to be stable they require an infrastructure which encourages the population, to stay in their community, to contribute towards its development and to provide an environment to which outside professionals will feel welcome and fulfilled.

In 1997 at the 26th Federal ICPA Conference in Roma members called on the Federal and State Governments to implement processes that require a rural impact assessment and statement be carried out and attached to every policy paper and cabinet submission affecting the policy areas of importance to rural communities.

ICPA believes that the prospects for rural development, and thus, the prospects for a better future for Australia's rural and remote people and places, are dependent upon a broad range of appropriate educational options and activities.

'A rural development policy worthy of the name will include a compelling vision of what an excellent rural education should encompass. It will also address the issue of how best to make education a central part of the overall rural agenda.' (Sher and Sher. 1994).

However, it is patently obvious that while a highly educated rural and remote population can facilitate both ecologically and economically sustainable growth, such a scenario begs the question as to whether this can happen without interventionist economic policies by the Commonwealth and State Governments. Without such policies, the current scenario whereby a significant proportion of rural and remote youth that receive higher education never return to their regions because of limited professional job opportunities and substandard physical and social infrastructure, will continue to flourish.

**Education Allowances** - many families who live in geographic isolation are in the unique position where education facilities are not as readily accessible as they are for their less isolated peers. In 1973 the Federal Government recognised this lack of equality of access by introducing the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) scheme, an allowance which provided 55% of the average boarding fee enabling many children who would have otherwise had their optional educational opportunities not realised to attend school through boarding schools and hostels.

Education facilities, no matter how well they provide for the needs of the community are of little consequence to those students who cannot access them due to distance and cost.

ICPA (Aust) seeks to **achieve equality of access to educational opportunities for geographically isolated students living in rural and remote areas by way of government funded allowances to compensate for the costs incurred in gaining access to an appropriate primary, secondary and post secondary education.** We see this equality achieved through;

- the provision of a non means tested Basic Boarding Allowance equivalent to 55% of the Average Boarding Fee, indexed annually to that fee.
- the provision of a means tested Additional Boarding Allowance for those in need, graded up to the level of the Average Boarding Fee.
- the provision of a Second Home Allowance equivalent to the Basic Boarding Allowance for those families who establish a second home to provide daily access to an appropriate school for their children.
- the provision of a realistic Distance Education Allowance, to help defray the cost of educating geographically isolated children at home.

## **Inquiry into Infrastructure and the Development of Australia's Regional Areas ICPA (Aust) Response**

- the provision of a Geographically Isolated Parent School Supervisor and Child Carer (GIPSSACC) allowance in recognition of the essential role played by home tutors in Distance Education delivery. Distance Education today is a demanding role for the home tutor (usually the mother). It is essentially the job of a teacher, without the training or remuneration and usually included with the other daily tasks of an isolated mother e.g. bookkeeping, cooking, helping on the property.

ICPA (Aust) sees the GIPSSACC allowance as a form firstly, of respite for the mother, perhaps providing the means to obtain some temporary help with the teaching or the cooking or supervising the pre schooler who needs mother's time too. Secondly, the allowance could be used as the means for the mother to obtain professional development, as travel or accommodation funding to attend seminars, classes etc. which would enhance the mother's ability to cater for her student's needs.

**Boarding Schools and School Term Hostels** . - the **1996 national report on Schooling in Australia** shows that the Year 12 school completion rates for remote boys have plummeted to 44%, which is 26% below the 73% rate for city girls. The completion rate is approaching the same low levels of 1972 when ICPA was formed and the AIC scheme was introduced.

In July 1997, ICPA (Aust) prepared a submission for the Federal Government seeking recurrent funding for 'school access providers' for students in remote areas. i.e.. boarding schools and school term hostels. It was pointed out that the lower cost regional hostels and boarding schools were particularly vital to the families of isolated students who were not completing school, because of their normally affordable cost. Significant areas of rural and remote Australia have endured drought and economic depression for a number of years, consequently the viability of these regional facilities is being affected by lack of isolated students and absence of government support.

Boarding facilities play a large and important part in ensuring that children from rural and remote areas are able to access a school education, whether they attend a government or non government school. ICPA (Aust) seeks to have **boarding schools and school term hostels as a recognised form of access to education for geographically isolated students who must live away from home to access an appropriate primary and/or secondary education.** We advocate:

- that Non Government and Government boarding schools be recognised as providing 'access to education' for geographically isolated students and be funded by State and Federal Governments on a per capita recurrent funding basis for **each AIC student enrolled.**
- that State and Federal governments recognise school term hostels as providing 'education access' for geographically isolated students and provide **recurrent funding on an equitable** and regular basis **for each AIC student enrolled.**
- That the Commonwealth Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, in accordance with its 'needs' charter provide a special form of assistance to supplement the State recurrent funding to all boarding facilities which offer special facilities, pastoral care and curriculum to support the education of geographically isolated students.
- that provision of short - term emergency financial assistance be continued to all facilities which provide boarding and to cater primarily for geographically isolated children.
- that 'education access' facilities be exempt from fringe benefits tax on notional benefits provided for residential supervisory and tutorial staff on duty or call on the premises.
- that capital funding for establishment, extension or upgrading of school term hostels, by both State and Federal governments, be on a recognisable rather than 'ad hoc' basis, e.g.. \$1 raised by the group establishing, extending or upgrading the hostel is matched by a \$2 grant from both

## **Inquiry into Infrastructure and the Development of Australia's Regional Areas ICPA (Aust) Response**

State and Commonwealth departments of Education.

**Country Areas Program (CAP)** - the original philosophy behind the Country Areas program was to improve the quality of rural schooling experiences and to promote parent and community participation.

ICPA continues to support the Commonwealth funded Country Areas Program, which has assisted in improving educational participation, and achievements of students disadvantaged by restricted access to social, cultural and educational activities and services as a result of their geographic isolation.

We believe that it is essential:

- that the Federal Government continues to provide funding to allow CAP to continue in all States and Territories on an equitable basis.
- that priority funding be given to support the implementation of innovative programs in isolated areas
- that CAP funding should be weighted more heavily for small and remote school communities, or where normal services are unavailable.
- that there be a continuation of the intersystemic administration of funding and programs through community based regional committees, wherever this would be the most effective and appropriate structure.
- that the Commonwealth encourages the State education departments and non government systems to adopt successful program initiatives which have become recognised as essential educational support services in rural and remote schools.
- that CAP remain a separate program within the Special Needs section as it is the only program which addresses the unique needs of students in schools who are disadvantaged because of geographic isolation.

The Country Areas program continues to be an **extremely valuable and highly valued** program by rural and remote communities because;

- it is excellent value for money
- helps generate feelings in small isolated schools of being included
- enriches the curriculum of schools
- fosters interest in learning
- often brings schools and their communities together in fruitful partnerships
- provides appreciable professional development opportunities for teachers
- enhances the social and cultural life of small isolated communities' and in its organisation, administration, management and overall accountability provides a model for equity programs.

CAP delivers considerable equity in isolated rural and remote regions and is an empowering phenomenon for individuals, their schools and communities.

## **Inquiry into Infrastructure and the Development of Australia's Regional Areas ICPA (Aust) Response**

### **COMMUNICATIONS**

**Telecommunications** - Rural and remote residents and consumers are insistent that the Universal Service Obligation (Telephone) is upgraded, tightened up and expanded on an ongoing basis to reflect changing technology and community expectations regardless of who the carrier may be.

Also that the Standard Telephone Service is redefined to not only include voice but also includes facsimile and comparable data capacity as our urban counterparts expect and receive.

***It is essential that quality communication infrastructure is urgently implemented for rural and remote residents to ensure communication services are available at an affordable cost and comparable speeds as urban residents receive. The Internet Cafes are only an 'add on' at present to these residents without the basic communication infrastructure being installed.***

It is essential that the Universal (customer) Service Guarantee infrastructure is continued to protect rural and remote consumers, regardless of the carrier or future carriers, so as to ensure service and maintenance of fault rectification time lines and installations of the telephone networks is kept to a minimum in these areas. These services are essential for education, health, social and business reasons as equity, justice and necessity.

ICPA (Aust) feels untimed local calls to rural and remote areas should be on the same basis as other Australians. The introduced Rebate Scheme does not address legislative rights of the majority of people who live and work in rural and remote Australia and the use of "13" numbers currently negates this rebate.

Isolated families feel as though they have been slighted by the Governments "Social Bonus Package." Isolated families living in the "Outer Extended Zone" – receive very little benefit from this "Social Bonus." They still have timed calls to their Service Town, their School of Distance Education, their children boarding at the local boarding facilities, their local doctor, their local Banks, their local Internet provider, virtually every service and social contact that is accessible **UNTIMED** to our urban counterparts.

ICPA (AUST) policy is that "Calls within a customer's extended zone, between their zone and their neighbouring extended zone and between the customer and their service centre be untimed. (Local Call)" This policy closely parallels how untimed local call pricing works in urban areas while distances may be greater in the rural and remote zones, the number of assessable "local" subscribers is vastly reduced.

ICPA (AUST) does not accept Telstra's argument that granting untimed calls to rural and remote customers will cause system congestion. They have never presented any evidence to support their claim.

In the proposed changes of the Analogue System to Digital in rural and remote areas it must be an affordable system that is workable and has at least the same or better range of delivery as previously.

**Postal** - It is essential to ensure that with any privatisation the Universal Service Guarantee (Postal Service) continues to deliver Distance Education (DE) material as a letter delivery service regardless of a person's place of residence. At present the DE papers, although classified as parcel delivery are sent at letter delivery rate. This is most relevant to families receiving these postings via the Remote Air Service Subsidy Scheme. If this was to change the cost would become prohibitive to those concerned.

**The Remote Air Services Subsidy Scheme (RASSS)** - The Remote Air Services Subsidy (RASS) Scheme which is currently under review provides subsidies to four air service companies servicing remote communities which currently have no suitable alternate mode of transport for the delivery of mail and educational supplies. Services operate out of Cairns and Mt Isa - Queensland, Katherine and

## **Inquiry into Infrastructure and the Development of Australia's Regional Areas** **ICPA (Aust) Response**

Alice Springs – Northern Territory, Port Augusta – South Australia and Kununurra – Western Australia.

People who have the skills and commitment to live in the remotest parts of Australia should be able to reasonably expect that the export income and national wealth which they generate and pay taxes on in good years, would entitle them to two basic services like mail and access to schooling.

ICPA (AUST) requests;

- that the RASS Scheme be consolidated, funded and restructured where necessary, so that isolated remote clients, operators and providers can face the future with services which are fundamental, modest, adequate and necessary as equity and justice.
- that the Federal Government guarantee the Remote Area Service Subsidy Scheme (RASSS) will be retained in its present form of providing a free regular mail service and a passenger and freight service to isolated remote families and communities where there is no reliable alternative.
- that the Federal Government ensures that Australia Post deliver parcels to properties serviced by the RASSS with no extra charge above that of delivery to the nearest Post Office.

**Travel/Transport** Of overriding importance in assisting sustainable development of regional areas is the ability to easily and comfortably move in and out and between these areas.

Regional roads must be continuously maintained and upgraded. It is no good providing a wonderful service in a rural or remote community if people cannot or are reluctant to access it because of poor road infrastructure./In areas where climatic conditions make road maintenance impossible for parts of the year, alternative modes of transport e.g. rail, air should be maintained and made as cost effective as possible.

ICPA (Aust) seeks the provision of affordable travel services and associated allowances ensuring access to school, place of board or educational facilities by the most appropriate means provided by bus, coach, boat, train or where necessary air services: such to be reciprocal between an adjoining state /territory.

We advocate that the Federal Government and relevant authorities increase the percentage of fuel tax returned for maintenance of country roads, which are used for students to access education.

**Small Rural and Remote Schools** - in small communities the school is an integral part of the community. It is often the centre of many activities - both educational and social. It is essential that support and maintenance of these schools continues. ICPA (Aust) therefore seeks to ensure the continuity of delivery of quality educational services to students in rural and remote schools and pre-schools. In order to enhance these services we believe:

- that a 'rural education' component should be included in pre service teacher training courses, to prepare teachers for the diversity of teaching situations in rural and remote schools.
- that the 'rural education' component be supported by pre-service practical experiences conducted in a diversity of teaching situations in rural and remote areas. e.g. Queensland University Technology and ICPA QLD have developed a program for student teacher prac placements across rural and remote Queensland. This program enables student teachers to gain first-hand experience teaching in small schools, along with an opportunity to develop an understanding of what remote schools and communities are really like. One of the significant outcomes of this program has been that many of the students (the majority of whom are from the city) have applied for and accepted appointments in rural and remote communities.

## **Inquiry into Infrastructure and the Development of Australia's Regional Areas ICPA (Aust) Response**

- that students at small rural and remote schools have access to new educational technology and ongoing training in the use of the technology
- that specialist services be available to students attending small rural and remote schools.
- that extra resources be made available to provide access to a wide range of educational opportunities for students in small rural and remote schools and that the following inequities imposed by geographic isolation be taken into consideration,
  - a) the personal and professional isolation of teachers
  - b) the reduced secondary curriculum options which can be offered
  - c) the levels of staff experience
  - d) the additional postage and telephone costs
  - e) the difficulties and costs of technology
  - f) the additional time staff and students have to be away from schools to participate in a range of activities, together with associated costs.

**Early Childhood Education** - the demand for early childhood services continues to grow right throughout rural and remote areas of Australia. It is critical that policy makers fully understand the growing social isolation that many young families in rural and remote areas are facing as a result of population decline. Access to a range of early childhood programs is crucial to the emotional well-being of these families, providing vital support for parents working 'off and on farm', as well as those living in small remote communities.

ICPA (Aust) advocates that an appropriate range of early childhood programs be available to support children and families who live in rural and remote areas, and

- that funds be distributed on the basis of need to ensure the ongoing development of early childhood programs that support families who live in rural and remote areas. For example:
  - a) the RICE program in South Australia
  - b) Contact Inc's National Residential Training Program (Mobile Muster) NSW
  - c) The 'Parents as Teachers' program in the Northern Territory
  - d) The Oatlands Childcare Centre 'Mobile Service' in Tasmania
  - e) The 'Remote Area Family Service' and the 'Remote Family Care Service' sponsored by Frontier Services, in Queensland
  - f) The Rural Children's Program in Queensland which has emphasised the need for communities to identify the type of service they need, and has attempted to be flexible and innovative in meeting some of the children's services needs in rural and remote areas.
- that there be an ongoing commitment to maintaining funding for mobile units providing Early Childhood programs.
- that there be a commitment to establishing support networks and ongoing professional development for early childhood teachers and child carers in rural and remote communities.

Early Childhood mobile units can in many instances act as an early intervention mediation with a child/children with learning difficulties. They can provide information on where assistance can be obtained and the personnel to contact. In some instances it is the mobile service personnel who have detected a particular problem with a child that the parent has not perceived. Without these mobiles early intervention of special needs for many isolated rural and remote families would never have eventuated.

## **Inquiry into Infrastructure and the Development of Australia's Regional Areas ICPA (Aust) Response**

**Distance Education** - is an alternative option to normal school air lessons offered at these centres and as an enhancement for written courses.

ICPA (Aust) seeks:

- an integrated quality distance education service centred on personal interaction from K – 12 offering a complete network of programs, facilities and support services to be provided through a system of coordinated educational services delivered to geographically isolated students homes and schools in rural and remote areas.
- that priority be given to establish clear reliable two way voice and data communications from all School Of the Air (SOTA) or Distance Education Centres, (ie teacher/student, supervisor/teacher, student/ teacher, student/student),
  - a) 'on air' services be available to students K –12
  - b) two way data be available to students K – 12
  - c) supply of computer systems equipped with modems to students K-12

It is important there be the provision for forward planning to ensure the use of new technology is to enhance, not replace the personal contact between teacher/student, teacher/supervisor/ and student/student.

- that provision for all students enrolled with Schools OF Distance education to have at the place they receive their education (ie their homes) access to data communications at Integrated Service Delivery Network (ISDN) equivalent rates.

ICPA (Aust) requests the Federal Government to allow Sales Tax exemption on items purchased for use by isolated rural and remote students studying via Distance Education mode in a home based classroom.

**Tertiary Education** - The recent Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission publication, 'Bushtalks,' has confirmed what ICPA (Aust) has continually stated with the findings damning to the alarmingly low participation rates in tertiary education for rural and remote students. In 1997 just 16% of rural and remote students entered tertiary education, a drop of 36% over an eight-year period.

There are urgent changes needed in the Youth Allowance criteria, ensuring a fair access to education for rural and remote students.

ICPA (Aust) seeks;

- the provision of a fair Actual Means Test on the Youth Allowance, modified to ensure that it does not disadvantage access to the Youth Allowance by remote families whose income and assets cannot be easily separated from the business they run for the purposes of determining their ability to provide secondary and post secondary education funding for their children. ICPA supports the need to raise the discount on farm/small business income earning assets from 55% to at least 75% for the purposes of determining Youth Allowance eligibility.'



## **Inquiry into Infrastructure and the Development of Australia's Regional Areas ICPA (Aust) Response**

- That the Department of Family and Community Services recognises that partnerships of husband and wife, wholly or mainly engaged in primary production should be excluded from the application of the Family Actual Means test in the same way that sole traders in a similar situation are excluded.
- That subject to appropriate substation (eg tax, wage and work records) wages paid to a Youth Allowance recipient from his/her family partnership, company or trust should be given the same concessional treatment from the family's Actual Means as income earned from an outside employer or sole trading parent.
- The implementation of the Loan Scheme as proposed by Federal Council (ICPA) and presented to various Ministers and Departmental personnel, to give those students not eligible for the Youth Allowance, access to tertiary studies.

### **HEALTH ISSUES**

There is irrefutable evidence of the inferior status of health in rural and remote areas and of inferior access to and options in health services.

It is hoped that when the barriers are overcome, there will be substantial and immediate improvements in rural and remote health status. All too often the barriers are the frequent failure of the Government and Associations to collaborate adequately with consumers. The difficulties in collaborating closely with each other means that many health services are delivered in a context which are being overly prescriptive or implemented in a 'one size fits' all approach to health services in rural and remote areas.

With the launch of the document "Healthy Horizons" the Ministers have agreed that this document represents a unique and essential undertaking by State, Territory and Commonwealth Governments to ensure efforts are coordinated and clearly focussed on the priority health issues faced by rural and remote Australians.

The health of people in rural, regional and remote Australia is varied and diverse and there is a need to be flexible in the way in which health services are delivered and the 'Healthy Horizons' framework provided the context for this to occur and ICPA (Aust) supports this.

Often the links between health which affects one's lifestyle and education abilities is not apparent or well understood

ICPA (Aust) seeks

- Identification and early intervention strategies becoming a reality for all children with specific needs irrespective of where they live.
- That students with special needs, studying by distance education or in small rural and remote schools have regular access to special education support teachers and therapists.
- The provision of mobile units and itinerant specialists and therapists to visit on a regular basis, central locations in isolated areas, enabling the early identification and ongoing support for children with special needs.

In conclusion ICPA (Aust) requests the Federal Government to honour its commitment to rural Australia by developing a Rural Communities Policy and to set in place a procedure to investigate the impact on rural communities of any proposed policy, before implementation.

**Inquiry into Infrastructure and the Development of Australia's Regional Areas  
ICPA (Aust) Response**

ICPA (Aust) would be pleased to provide any additional information if required.