



ICPA (Aust)

Isolated Children's Parents' Association Inc

Early Childhood Education & Care Portfolio

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Briefing Paper



-Access to Education for rural and remote students -

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), is a voluntary, apolitical, national parent organisation working on behalf of our members for equity of access to appropriate education for children living outside of metropolitan areas.

Accessing affordable early childhood education and care for families living in rural and remote regions has never been more concerning and is proving beyond the reach of many due to:

- lack of available services
- difficulty attracting and retaining staff
- inflexibility of service delivery programs
- high out-of-pocket costs
- uncertainty and inadequacy of funding for Mobile Early Childhood Services.

SUMMARY

Rural and remote early childhood education and care issues fall into three broad categories.

1. Universal Access to Early Childhood Education

The Commonwealth Government is committed to Preschool Reform Agreement 2022-2025.

- Affordability of and access to an early childhood education continues to impede the participation of some rural and remote children.
- The extension of Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education Allowance to include three and four-year-olds would improve access and affordability.
- Flexibility in the use of school buildings and flexibility in the qualifications of staff would expand the number of accessible early childhood education programs.

2. Mobile Early Learning

Mobile Early Learning Services can be the ONLY early childhood service accessible to some rural and remote families.

- Funding of Rural and remote Mobile Early Learning decreased under funding restructures and continues to be uncertain.
- No provisions for the establishment of new mobile early learning services are evident.
- Some rural and remote families have NO access to an early childhood service.

3. Child Care

A myriad of issues affects families educating and caring for their children in these areas. ICPA members continue to raise concerns about the inappropriateness of current delivery models for geographically isolated families and difficulties associated with accessing early childhood education and care in rural and remote areas.

- The Commonwealth Government's In Home Care (IHC) program is part of the child care package and provides flexible care that supports families' workforce participation and child care requirements where other options are not available or appropriate.
 - IHC can be the ONLY child care option for many rural and remote families.
 - IHC program guidelines are inflexible and consistently disadvantage rural and remote families. Distance education school rooms require a supervisor. IHC guidelines specifically preclude receipt of the Child Care Subsidy for supervision of distance education.
 - Workforce participation of rural and remote families with children on distance education is not

supported by the IHC program.

- Changes to criteria of Working Holiday Maker and Temporary Work (Skilled) Visas could help alleviate workforce shortages.
- A National Working with Children Check would improve the ease of transitioning child care and education staff between States/Territories.

ISSUE 1

UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The Federal Government is committed to the Preschool Reform Agreement 2022 – 2025 and recognises that early learning is vitally important however, accessibility and affordability is a barrier for some geographically isolated families for whom distance education is the only option. ICPA (Aust) seeks continuation of the Preschool Reform Agreement funding of \$1.6 billion over four years from 2021–22 to be delivered to the states and territories through a new four-year funding agreement, with ongoing funding of \$589.0 million per year (indexed) from 2025–26.

A myriad of issues affects families educating and caring for their children in these areas. ICPA members continue to raise concerns about the inappropriateness of current delivery models for geographically isolated families and difficulties associated with accessing child care and education in rural and remote areas. Specialised model/s need to be established for rural and remote families; programs designed to address the unique disadvantages and needs associated with caring for and educating children in geographically isolated locations.

RECOMMENDATION

- **The establishment of a stand-alone ‘Rural and Remote Early Childhood Section/Branch within the Department of Education, encompassing all early childhood education and care such as preschools and kindergartens, mobile early learning services, Long Day Care and In Home Care to provide for the unique needs of rural and remote families.**

The extension of Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education Allowance to include three and four-year-olds would improve access and affordability.

Three to four-year-old students enrolled in an approved pre-compulsory distance education program need to be supported while participating in their essential transition to formal schooling programs. The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education Allowance should be extended to include these children as no other financial assistance is available for this cohort.

The Australian Government recognises the importance of ensuring that children are not disadvantaged in terms of their early physical, social and educational development. Researchers throughout the world report that the social and developmental gap in children’s functioning and achievement can be significant by age six. These differences in the cognitive, non-cognitive and social skills are strong predictors of later academic, occupational and life achievement.

The delivery and accessibility of early learning programs for children in the year prior to starting formal schooling has never been better. This can be attributed to the Federal Government’s commitment to the Universal Access to Early Childhood Education Program. Despite this, ICPA (Aust) remains concerned about the affordability of accessing programs for those living in rural and remote regions.

ICPA (Aust) believes the impact of not being able to access affordable early learning for children living beyond the metropolitan boundaries is evident in the gap between educational outcomes for rural and remote students when compared to those living in large centres. Much of this is due to learning difficulties which are undiagnosed in the early years and having very limited opportunities to socialise and interact with other

children.

All States and Territories offer early learning programs delivered by distance education and this is the *only* avenue available for many families living in rural and remote areas. Families wanting to access these programs are bearing the entire cost associated with administering, resourcing and teaching the lessons. Across Australia, around 200 children access recognised 3-4-year-old programs in their homes through distance education, which today includes a mixture of hands-on play-based learning and teacher-led structured lessons which involve the use of technology for communication. As with every other early childhood program for three to four-year-olds, these distance education lessons are designed to help children transition from home to school. The children need a designated learning space in which to learn school behaviours, such as the ability to sit at a desk for enough time to complete a task, to use the technology required for distance education, to appropriately interact with their peers and teacher and to understand the formal concept of school.

It is vital that young children have opportunities to socialise face-to-face with other children of their age. This often requires families to travel great distances to attend school functions which provide an opportunity for the children to participate in group activities, such as sport, practise conversation skills and socialise with their peers. These functions are also valuable in providing teachers and other professionals with both group and individual evaluation and diagnostic opportunities.

Families undertaking approved distance education programs are effectively blocked from any funding to assist with meeting the costs of program delivery, setting up their schoolroom and accessing school functions. These students are deemed ineligible for the Assistance for Isolated Children, (AIC), Distance Education Allowance as 3-4-year olds taking part in these early learning programs are not recognised by the Australian Government and no payment is available through the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) as these children are still in their parents' care.

RECOMMENDATION

- **Extension of the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education Allowance to include 3-4-year-olds undertaking an approved pre-compulsory distance education program.**

More facilities for preschool education in rural and remote communities.

The flexibility of use of school buildings in small rural towns to include preschoolers, more preschool distance education places and more facilitators are required to ensure that all students have access to the required 15 hours per week preschool education. Facilitators should include qualified primary school teachers and diploma qualified educators where Early Childhood teachers are difficult to access. Students commencing formal schooling need to be school-ready, especially as Early Learning Languages Australia (ELLA) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects in the form of Early Learning STEM Australia (ELSA) have also been introduced to the preschool curriculum. Rural and remote students will lag behind their urban peers from the very beginning if preschool has not been experienced in their early years.

RECOMMENDATION

- **Dispensations be made to improve access to preschool facilitators and school facilities in rural and remote areas.**

ISSUE 2

MOBILE EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES IN RURAL AND REMOTE AREAS

For many years, various mobile children's services have delivered the important services of being able to provide social contact, professional advice, mobile early learning services and early childhood programs. They play a vital role in offering developmental opportunities for children and interactions with parents in small

rural communities and outlying, often very isolated, areas. In many cases, these services provide the only face-to-face interaction for children of similar ages. Flexibility and certainty of funding for these services is vital in providing the much needed socialisation component of early childhood programs for these communities. Adequate funding needs to continue for mobile early learning services and early education programs for rural and remote children as well as funds and support for the creation of new services in geographically isolated areas where early childhood services do not exist. The following issues need to be addressed:

- Mobile early learning services no longer funded under Budget Based Funding (BBF) were transitioned to Indigenous Advancement Strategy funding or to new Child Care system funding. Neither model sufficiently caters for the unique services provided by mobile early learning services to rural and remote families, especially those services which do not include child care.
- No provision appears to be available for the establishment of new mobile early learning services.
- Funding continues to be inadequate and uncertain.

RECOMMENDATION

- **Mobile early learning services in rural and remote areas, be supported with adequate and secure funding.**

ISSUE 3

CHILD CARE

In Home Care (IHC)

Families living in rural and remote Australia, who are able to provide accommodation, previously found the IHC program to be an affordable option when it came to accessing child care. However presently In Home Care is not meeting the needs of families, with the following four main concerns continually raised by our members:

- That the IHC program needs to remain accessible for all rural and remote families who have no other child care options.
- IHC educators should be allowed to supervise distance education where face-to-face schooling is not available as teachers are not present to look after the children.
- The difficulty of finding suitably qualified people to employ in their homes to provide child care or to teach the children of rural and remote families who must be educated by distance education.
- Fees charged by IHC providers are rising and changing often without explanation.
- The limitations of the IHC National Guidelines which require educators to be at least 18 years of age, despite either working towards a minimum Certificate III level qualification or already obtaining the qualification. This limits the opportunity for young workers to be gainfully employed following graduation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **That an In Home Care (IHC) program, or sub-program thereof, be established specifically for rural and remote families.**
- **That amendments be made to IHC Guidelines to cater for the needs of rural and remote families.**
- **That Child Care Subsidy decisions make specific dispensation or consideration of IHC circumstances.**
- **That a specific IHC program be established for rural and remote families who have to provide board and lodging for their educators to reduce families' gap payments for IHC.**
- **That a flexible approach be taken with respect to the required qualifications for rural and remote teachers/educators.**
- **That IHC educators be allowed to supervise distance education where face-to-face schooling is not available as teachers are not present to look after the children in distance education schoolrooms.**

- **A review of and structure provided around the fees charged to families and educators by IHC providers.**
- **The amendment of the IHC National Guidelines to allow graduates with a Certificate in Early Childhood Education, or equivalent, who are less than the age of 18 years to be eligible for positions of employment through the IHC program.**

Short term child care services

There are short term child care services available to some rural and remote families who cannot afford to them as they do not attract the Child Care Subsidy through Services Australia.

Case Study: In South Australia, the Remote and Isolated Children’s Exercise (RICE) provide an Outback Childcare program that enables families to receive short-term child care in the family home when they are in need of child care during busy times or if they need respite or emergency care. Currently this program does not attract any Government support or funding, resulting in RICE having to rely on community donations or asking families to pay an unsubsidised, full rate hourly fee for the service. The Child Care Scheme (CCS) can only be received when a child is enrolled through a centre-based child care facility or through the In Home Care (IHC) program which is currently unavailable for RICE member families due to provider limitations within South Australia. The cost to access child care without the CCS is an unaffordable option, leaving families to try find other ways to manage child care needs. Families living in rural and remote areas have no real option of child care like community creches, nearby centres or family or friends who could step in. Living on a remote cattle station 1000km from Adelaide makes asking your mum, sister or best friend to step in and help for the day unpractical and often impossible. With the recent report that indicated the Federal Electorate of Grey (which encompasses 90% of South Australia, including all of its rural and remote areas) has the worst access to child care in the country, just finding a facility, let alone accessing it, is a difficult undertaking in itself. The Outback Childcare service needs to be made affordable for families as well as being viable for RICE to manage and administer.

If the criteria for eligibility for the CCS was to consider the needs of rural and remote families, therefore allowing them to access child care through the IHC program, then the RICE based Outback Childcare and similar services would become more affordable and accessible for families in times of need.

RECOMMENDATION

- **Consideration of the uniqueness of child care needs and child care services in rural and remote communities with regard to these families accessing the Child Care Subsidy.**

Working with Children Check

The process of obtaining the Working with Children Check (WWCC) in each State or Territory is expensive, slow and impedes early childhood workers, tutors and teachers who wish to help various families interstate. A national WWCC certification would help resolve this and was recommended in the Royal Commission into Child Abuse Final Report^{3F1}.

ICPA (Aust) supports all the Governments’ efforts to progress a national WWCC certification soon to efficiently fulfil the staffing needs of rural and remote families.

RECOMMENDATION

- **That a National Working with Children Check (WWCC) certification be established as a matter of priority to ensure early childhood carers, teachers, educators and those assisting with education particularly in rural and remote areas can transition across States/Territories more smoothly.**

Working Holiday Maker Program: Working Holiday Maker Visas and the Shortage of Distance Education Tutors and Nannies in Rural and Remote Australia

Due to geographical isolation, there is a distinct lack of Australian workers, including qualified child care and educational workers, who are willing to undertake work where remoteness is an issue. It is extremely difficult to attract and retain Australian child carers, home tutors (distance education tutors) and teachers to rural and remote areas. Frequently, the only people prepared to travel and work in remote areas are overseas travellers looking for a cultural exchange experience and our rural and remote members rely on the employment of overseas workers to fill these positions. While these workers are a valuable resource, under the conditions of their visas they are not eligible for a second- year visa if they undertake employment in the area of child care in rural and remote areas. Plant and animal cultivation, fishing and pearling, tree farming and felling, mining and construction are currently the specific fields of work that qualify an applicant for a second-year visa. Measures including extending the eligibility for a second-year visa to include child care and education provision under rural work are incentives for backpackers to holiday and work in rural and remote Australia.

The Second Year Working Holiday visas 4170F2 and 4621F3, are not available for distance education tutors/teachers or nannies from overseas in rural and remote areas, despite being rural work. However, with recent developments in regional areas of Australia, second-year visa applicants could be accepted there, on the 462 Working Holiday visa, if having worked for six months in agriculture, tourism or hospitality the previous year. Also, in regional areas of Australia, if working for six months for one employer on a Working Holiday Maker visa 417, permission can now be granted to stay another six months with that employer. If child care or distance education supervision were eligible as Specified Work, this would help provide workplaces for distance education tutors in other rural and remote areas if the same conditions apply as for other second-year visa seekers. In the distance education schoolroom, 12 months' support would be more beneficial than just six months to support the importance of continuity and consistency.

At times, overseas couples wish to work on a rural or remote property; both would enjoy the cultural experience and one partner is able to work with the livestock, orchards etc., however the other partner may wish for a less physical type of work. She is unable to work in the distance education schoolroom or assist with child care on the property to gain eligibility for a second-year visa as this is not on the 'Specified Work' list.

Making the second-year visa accessible to nannies and distance education tutors under agriculture would provide a better solution for rural families seeking to employ staff and a better experience for overseas workers who wish to remain with one employer.

¹ https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_-_recommendations.pdf

² <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/work-holiday-417/specified-work>

³ <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/work-holiday-462/specified-462-work>

Volunteer Work Activities

The removal of eligibility of volunteer work activities in application for a Second Year Working Holiday visa as of 1 December 2015, compounded the issue of shortage of work support in rural and remote areas. Families find it harder to find willing workers to assist in running the farm and managing their children's distance education. Many visitors to Australia appreciate 'real life experiences' on farm and are willing to volunteer their time in return for meals and accommodation e.g. 'WWOOF' program (Willing Workers on Organic Farms). If volunteer hours were once again reinstated as eligible for a Second-Year Visa, rural Australia's employment pool would expand relieving pressure on its families.

RECOMMENDATION

- **The reinstatement of volunteer hours as an eligible activity for a Second-Year Visa.**

Temporary Work (Skilled) Visa (subclass 457)

This visa was replaced with the new Temporary Skill Shortage (TSS) (subclass 482) Visa in March 2018 which

supports businesses in addressing genuine skill shortages, particularly in rural and remote areas. Visa applicants are now required to be sponsored by a business up to two or four years as per their specified skill. Skilled Early Childhood teachers, Primary and Middle School teachers, Private Tutors, Regional Education Managers and Child Care Centre managers are all on the approved occupation list. There is a real shortage of people willing to fulfil Distance Education supervisor/tutoring roles. If qualified teachers were happy to work with Distance Education students in remote classrooms, it would be an excellent option, however more often it is a skilled worker such as a nanny or governess who is willing to accept Distant Education opportunities. It would be extremely beneficial if nannies and governesses could be added to the TSS Occupations List and private tutors and teachers could then be approved for distance education classrooms.

RECOMMENDATION

- **That teachers, Distance Education tutors and nannies be added to the current 'Specified Work' list For Working Holiday Visas so they can assist with child care and education for rural and remote families.**

Staffing and employment incentives and pay package parity

For many years Education Departments have been aware of the need to provide pay and incentives to attract and keep teaching staff in rural and remote locations. We now need the same attention paid to attracting and retaining staff in the Early Childhood sector. In very remote areas, access to housing or subsidised housing can mean the difference between having an operational centre or not. Rural and remote areas need assistance to attract educators because our children deserve a 'good start' too.

We are losing university trained early childhood educators to the school system where the pay and conditions far outweigh that of long day care centres, yet we know how important those early years are. These educators are with our children during their years of greatest development, yet we are not prepared to pay or reward them accordingly. Pay parity of Early Childhood Teachers is a significant issue. An Early Childhood Teacher completes a four year degree course. If they elect to work in the public school system in a rural and remote location, the additional benefits they would get compared to working as an Early Childhood Teacher would include:

- Additional 7 weeks of annual leave (approx. \$10,000pa)
- Significantly shorter contact hours per week
- Approx. \$20,000-\$30,000 additional salary
- Professional mentoring by other teachers
- Structured Professional Development programs (\$10,000 pa)
- Access to teacher housing (at a 70% discount on market rates in Bourke) (\$10,000 pa).

Early Childhood services are significantly limited in their budgets.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Incentives and structures which allow Early Childhood educators to work in rural and remote areas without disadvantage in comparison to their urban colleagues.**
- **That pay package parity of Early Childhood Teachers in rural and remote locations across all Early Childhood Education settings be addressed.**