

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to the

Department of Agriculture

into the

Draft Drought Resilience Funding Plan

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), welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Australian Government Department of Agriculture *draft Drought Resilience Funding Plan*.

Since 1971, ICPA (Aust) has represented families living in rural and remote regions of Australia, who are passionate about the sustainability and prosperity of the industries they work in. Research indicates that the ability to access affordable and appropriate educational services plays a major factor in determining if a family will remain in rural and remote locations. The goal for our 2500 member families is to achieve equity of educational opportunity for all children living in rural and remote areas, ensuring they have access to a continuing and appropriate education determined by their aspirations and abilities rather than the location of their home. Remote and isolated locations in Australia provide the greatest challenges for improving provision of education options and pathways for children and families. In terms of educational and social development and to ensure their educational outcomes are not compromised, rural and remote students need the opportunity to access an education that is commensurate to their needs allowing them to realise their educational potential and presenting a pathway which provides educational parity with their urban peers.

ICPA (Aust) welcomes the government's commitment to future proofing rural and remote communities for drought within the draft Drought Resilience Funding Plan and the inclusion of the Strategic Priority of Social Resilience which recognises the need to *build drought resilience to maintain and improve the wellbeing and social fabric of rural and regional communities*. ICPA (Aust) believes that to build this social resilience support for the children of these communities and most importantly a recognition that the ability to continue their education in times of drought is essential. Despite the recent encouraging inclusion of a recognition of schooling difficulties in the Drought Stimulus Package, it is disappointing that education has not been specifically incorporated into the Drought Resilience Funding Plan. Investment in the children in drought-affected communities is essential to maintain the future well-being and resilience of these communities and funding and support for their education is a key way for this to be done.

ICPA (Aust) would like to see any future drought funding plans to include education as a priority area of assistance. Since the onset of the current severe drought affecting Australia, ICPA (Aust) has been requesting that assistance which is directed specifically towards ensuring the education of rural students can continue unaffected by the impact of drought be added to the available Drought Packages. ICPA (Aust) continues to make this request on behalf of families living in drought ravaged areas, so that they can have some certainty that their children's education can continue during these tough times. The impacts of drought on the education of the children of affected families cannot be discounted.

Drought impacts all types of schooling for rural and remote students, children in the towns as well as out on properties. The wellbeing and resilience of a community is truly tested when they are unable to provide basic compulsory education for their children. To alleviate this, it is essential that any Drought Resilience Plan should include a recognition of the burdens associated with the impacts of drought on children during times of drought and include specific educational assistance for drought affected families to assist in providing education for their children, which will in turn enhance their resilience and wellbeing while suffering through severe drought conditions. ICPA (Aust) believes education needs to be considered a key priority in any future drought funding plan.

Drought Impacting on Education

Early Years Learning

Educating younger rural and remote children in drought-stricken areas can be financially draining. Children miss out on learning opportunities because families cannot afford added costs associated with travelling many kilometres to access mobile playgroups and kindergartens for social interaction. Finding funds for out-of-pocket costs to educate preschoolers can be problematic. Families also have difficulty funding escalating increased In Home Care (IHC) fees for child care. With a focus on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education and a recognition that access to an early childhood program is essential, children in drought-affected areas who are not able to participate in these services may have long term impacts. The viability of Long Day Care Centres, early learning centres and kindergartens is also vulnerable when communities are struggling with drought, and consideration for support of these early learning programs should also be a part of an education focus in creating resilience in rural communities.

Rural Schools

Students at schools in rural communities often have to forego normal supplementary educational activities like school camps, excursions or other events due to added expenses. Children are acutely aware of the difficult circumstances the drought brings and will make choices that they feel may help their families but may inhibit their education opportunities at the same time, such as choosing not to participate in the science competition or local sport representatives not attending competitions away from their community. Bringing outside specialist educators such as artists or sports coaches into the communities becomes more challenging as communities struggle to raise funds locally. The mental wellbeing of both parents and students is adversely impacted due to the bleak environment. This in turn affects the wellbeing of whole communities as they struggle to provide for their children. Limited educational opportunity and experiences can also mean families choose to move away from these areas due to the lack of equitable educational opportunities, thus further damaging the social fabric of the communities.

Distance Education

The role of distance education ‘supervisor’ or ‘home tutor’ often falls on the mother. In times of drought it can be difficult for the mother to be in the schoolroom for the required time when she is needed in the paddock. Families find it hard to pay a tutor, and finding a governess/tutor often proves difficult as fewer people are interested in taking jobs in isolated drought affected areas even when families are able to pay a wage.

Some families have relied on the In Home Care (IHC) scheme to subsidise tutor wages however, this scheme does not entirely meet the needs of rural and remote families as tutors are only allowed to supervise homework and not distance education lessons, even when there is no face-to-face school nearby. One of the intents of the IHC scheme and the New Child Care Package is to get as many parents into work or study as possible, however, with educators not being able to supervise the home learning centre for Distance Education students other than for homework times, geographically isolated mothers are hindered in their ability to work and this small cohort of rural and remote families are excluded from the benefits of the program.

Boarding Schools

Rural and remote students often have limited secondary schooling options available to them as many have no reasonable daily access to age appropriate schooling where they live. Besides those students living in a remote location where no school exists other than a form of ‘School of Distance Education’, there are also many cases in rural areas where the closest school does not offer schooling above Middle School, or does not offer High School at all. For example, in Queensland there are eight Shires with no high school and another two Shires where high school only provides to Year 10. It is not just “property/station” children who go away to boarding school. Many rural towns only have P-6 primary schools, so the town children also often go away to a school that offers boarding to receive an

education. These children live too far away to travel back and forth from home and school regularly as there are no schools near them. There is sometimes a misunderstanding that these students are going past the local school to try to have an “elite” education, however for many of these rural children, no local school exists. While Distance Education for Secondary students is available, it can be very difficult to commit to and be successful at, especially if a student has attended a local school for their primary years and does not have a previous distance education background. High School age students undertaking distance education require a dedicated supervisor and families often do not have the resources or financial support to provide one.

Across all states there are relatively few government-run boarding school options available to families, which leaves most having to pay the ever-increasing high costs of independent or private boarding schools to educate their children. State run hostels in many states have dwindled to very low numbers and many only offer Monday-Friday boarding which is problematic for the majority of boarders who must travel long distances. In 2015, ICPA (Aust) surveyed its members with 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. To put this into perspective, in times of drought, this equates to a 12T load of lick or 24T load of hay. Families are seriously looking at these considerations when trying to decide whether to buy fodder to keep their stock alive or pay school fees to continue the education of their children. Rural families are going into overdraft and borrowing money to pay for compulsory education. ICPA (Aust) is aware of families who have reached the limits of their overdrafts and are now wondering where their children can attend school, to receive a basic service so easily accessible by those in larger centres, if they cannot borrow or find any more funds to pay for educational costs.

Often rural families have more than one student away at boarding school at one time (often between two and four children in a family studying at once). This places a huge cost pressure on the family and is unsustainable during times of drought. ICPA is hearing of heartbreaking cases where families cannot pay boarding and tuition fees and the students are no longer able to continue at their school. In some instances, families are delaying their children going away to school or bringing them home early and in some cases choosing which of their children they can educate. Some are not going away to school at all while others are being brought home which can mean that education then stops for the most part, especially for boys as they may be needed to work on the property. One NSW family, for example, is rotating bringing their boys home from school during term to help keep their stock alive while Dad goes out and earns off-farm income to help pay the mounting bills.

Some families can no longer afford to pay staff, or have reduced staff numbers, so the increasing workload falls directly on family members. Schools for the most part are being extremely supportive to rural boarding students, with some offering discounts, bursaries, time payments and help where they can. Ultimately, these schools are businesses and cannot give all rural students a free education if they are to remain viable. ICPA (Aust) is very concerned about the future of these young children, as their education cannot be put ‘on hold’ for a couple of years while the drought is on, in the hope that the children can go back to schooling at a later date when a family’s finances have improved.

Mental Health

The mental health of rural children and their families during this drought is of a major concern to ICPA (Aust) and our members. Parents feel they have let their family down by not being able to provide a basic right of education for their children. The effects of drought on children are also significant as highlighted in the report released by UNICEF Australia in February 2019: “In Their Own Words: The Hidden Impact of Prolonged Drought on Children and Young People” which highlighted the unique

challenges for children experiencing drought and concerns for the wellbeing of these children. Students feel the pressure as they know the high cost incurred by their families for them to be at school. These students know their families struggle to find the funds to keep them in school and they can feel an extra need to do well because of this. Rural children also feel guilty for being away at school rather than at home helping when they know their family needs them. Many families do not talk about the real situation openly as they do not want the children worrying, which builds up pressure and creates anxiety. In a less than ideal situation, some rural families due to the high cost of accessing education are splitting, with mum and the children going to live in town to access school, leaving dad to deal with the drought at home alone. To alleviate this, it is essential that any Drought Resilience Plan should include a recognition of the burdens associated with the impacts of drought on children during times of drought and include specific educational assistance for drought affected families to assist them to provide education for their children, which will in turn enhance their resilience and wellbeing while suffering from severe drought conditions.

Tertiary and Training

Rural families have difficulties meeting the relocation and accommodation costs associated with higher education and training. Fewer apprentice and training opportunities are available in drought affected areas which means that these young people need to go further away to try to find traineeships and placements, which comes at a cost of relocation as well as living away from home. These extra costs can be even more difficult to cover in times of drought. Often the workforce in rural and remote areas is dependent on past residents returning with increased skills to these communities. The return of skilled young people to rural areas and communities is vital and will help sustain these communities in the long term, but they must be able to access education and training and feel there is a future for them in rural communities. Students from drought-affected communities should not be disadvantaged from accessing tertiary and training opportunities.

Educational Assistance in Previous Droughts

In the last significant drought, a number of measures directly assisting with educational costs for rural students were implemented.

- Exceptional Circumstances (EC) - families residing in areas declared to have EC automatically received the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Additional Boarding Allowance (ABA). While in the current drought assistance families receiving the Farm Household Allowance (FHA) qualify for ABA, these families who apply and qualify for the FHA most likely would be eligible for ABA anyway due to their low income. Receiving the ABA under the Farm Household Allowance is not automatically based on solely if a family lives in a drought-affected area as it was previously under the EC program (families received supplementary AIC assistance automatically under EC, they did not have to apply for something such as the FHA in order to receive help with school costs). ICPA (Aust) does not request the re-establishment of Exceptional Circumstances, however ICPA (Aust) does wish to note that from an education perspective, the Farm Household Allowance is not designed to automatically assist families living in a drought area with education access costs, where the previous EC program did have this provision.
- Drought Assistance for School Funding- Budget Measure 2008:
Small schools in rural and remote EC declared areas received up to \$10,000 per year while EC declared (\$1000 base + \$100 per student). This program was to assist with ongoing education expenses, cost of educational activities such as student excursions, text books, uniforms, subject levies, student attendance at extra-curricular activities and other educational activities which directly benefited students.
- 2008 through 2011 saw an Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) additional payment of \$1000, received by all AIC recipients for each year of the drought and one year afterwards. This supplementary payment of the AIC was given for all categories of AIC - Boarding, Distance

Education and Second Home Allowances. This additional AIC payment was a definite help to rural families struggling to meet schooling costs.

Rural Hardship Education Fund

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), has called for the Federal Government to introduce a Rural Hardship Education Fund to address the grave concerns of the many families in drought-stricken areas and in other times of rural hardship, who simply cannot afford to educate their children. On Thursday 17 October 2019, a motion was put by Senator Hanson in the Senate which read, "That the Senate calls on the Federal Government to consider putting in place a Rural Hardship Education Fund or other options to assist geographically isolated students and their families with educational expenses during times of rural hardship to ensure their education can continue unchanged". The motion was passed with the government's support.

ICPA (Aust) believes a Rural Hardship Education Fund (RHEF) should be put in place on a long-term basis to assist rural and remote students, schools and early learning centres with the cost of education during times of rural hardship to ensure their schooling can continue unchanged.

A permanent Rural Hardship Education Fund that remains in place within the Drought Resilience Funding Plan would mean that each time rural communities are impacted by drought critical time is not lost in trying to create assistance programs.

Geographically isolated children should not be disadvantaged or unable to attend their studies at boarding school, distance education or small rural schools due to ongoing long-term droughts or times of rural hardship. Educational expenses are an investment for the future prosperity of all our rural and remote communities and ICPA (Aust) urges the Federal Government to assist rural families in educating these children and creating resilience through continued education in times of drought.

A Rural Hardship Education Fund should include but not be limited to:

- Supplementary payment made through the Commonwealth Assistance for Isolated Children allowance (AIC) for rural and remote families identified as living in areas affected by hardship. A significant increase to the AIC is required to address the shortfall between the existing allowance rates and the actual cost of attending education for rural and remote students. Previous droughts (e.g. 2008) and the 2019 monsoon event saw a supplementary payment given to students receiving the AIC, however no additional assistance has occurred in the current drought. The AIC has been increased at times to reflect the needs of geographically isolated families in order to maintain education of their children, particularly in times of disaster. The AIC consists of several components including Boarding, Distance Education and Second Home and is well designed to get assistance to rural and remote families to assist with access to education. While approximately 11,000 students receive the Assistance for Isolated Children each year across all categories of the allowance, it is likely that only a portion would ever be affected by drought at one time, making the number requiring assistance lower.
- Additional Funding for Rural Schools located in affected areas which can be used at the schools' discretion for students' needs including school activities, camps, resources, uniforms, visiting coaches, specialised teachers and artists/musicians. This type of funding has been given to rural schools previously in times of hardship/drought, (e.g. 2009-2010 Federal Budget Measure – Drought Assistance for Schools), providing precedence for this type of assistance (although it has not been initiated in the current drought).
- Additional itinerant and specialist teachers made available in affected areas to enable more support for Distance Education students and Rural Schools, including home visits in remote classrooms and other localised support resources.

- Adjusted Child Care Subsidy rate/ Additional Child Care Subsidy (temporary financial hardship) available long-term to assist affected families to access In Home Care and child care for young children.
- Tertiary Access Allowance for rural and remote students enrolled in university, training courses, or apprenticeships.

Assistance should be targeted at geographically isolated students and consideration available for individual applications and not dependent on a state “declaration” as some states do not declare drought officially. These families’ income can suffer and their ability to pay for school costs be hindered just as much in what their state may call a “rain depression” as if they were officially drought declared. Consideration should be available for individual applications in situations where a family is outside a recognised assistance area or category but has similar circumstances and needs.

ICPA (Aust) Recommendations:

ICPA Australia feels strongly that in order to enhance resilience in children as well as their families and communities that funding which directly encompasses assistance for education should be included in the Federal Government’s Drought Funding Plan.

RURAL HARDSHIP EDUCATION FUND – Establishment of a permanent/long term Rural Hardship Education Fund that remains in place so that each time a disaster/hardship hits a rural area, funds are automatically available for geographically isolated students’ education assistance programs.

- **Supplementary payment made to the Assistance for Isolated Children allowance (AIC) for families identified as being in rural hardship. For example: living in drought-affected areas/states.**
- **Extra funding for Rural Schools, Early Learning/Long Day Care Centres in affected areas.**
- **Itinerant and specialist teachers made available to enable more support for Distance Education students and Rural Schools, including home visits in remote classrooms and other localised support resources.**
- **Adjusted Child Care Subsidy rate/extension of Additional Child Care Subsidy (temporary financial hardship) to assist affected families to access In Home Care for young children.**
- **Tertiary Access Allowance for rural and remote students enrolled in university, training courses, or apprenticeship.**

Geographically Isolated recipients of the Assistance for Isolated Children allowance should be the focus of any drought/RHEF supplementary payment of the AIC.

Assistance for Isolated Children supplementary assistance amount should at minimum be reflective of previous AIC drought assistance payment rates with consideration of rise in education costs.

- **At least \$2000 per student per year**
- **Should be for Geographically Isolated/Rural students (*a portion of students receive the AIC for different reasons such as medical needs or exclusion and do not necessarily live in a rural or remote area, so may not have the same family income impact due to rural hardship as those identified as geographically isolated/rural and remote*).**

Conclusion

ICPA (Aust) is encouraged by the development of the *draft Drought Resilience Funding Plan*. However we would like to see a recognition of the need to assist drought affected families with the costs associated with educating their children. Quality and equitable educational opportunities for the children will be a step toward building the future resilience of these communities when faced with the challenges associated with drought. ICPA (Aust) feels strongly that some form of drought assistance which directly encompasses assistance for education of children in drought-affect communities should be available.