

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

**"Access to Education"**



**Submission**

**to the**

**Review of the Regional Schooling Resource Standard Loadings**

**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 comment to the **Review of the Regional Schooling Resource Standard Loadings**.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary parent body dedicated to ensuring all geographically isolated students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education. This encompasses the education of children from early childhood through to tertiary. The member families of the association reside and work in rural and remote Australia and all share a common goal of achieving access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this.

Geographical location should not be a determinant of the quality of education a student has access to. Educational outcomes for rural and remote students continue to lag behind those of urban students. This factor should be at the forefront of any review of the school location loading and the school size loading under the Commonwealth’s recurrent school funding arrangements.

### **Independent Regional, Rural and Remote (RRR) Schools**

ICPA (Aust) welcomes the acknowledgement that regional and remote schools endure unique disadvantages that need to be considered when applying the school funding model in these contexts. As the Review’s Terms of Reference states, *“it generally costs more to educate students attending a school in regional and remote areas compared to metropolitan schools, and a school size loading to recognise that small schools cannot achieve the same efficiencies of scale as a large school.”*

ICPA (Aust) supports extra loading recommendations which recognise the disadvantages in regional, rural and remote (RRR) educational contexts. However, the Capacity to Contribute (CTC) arrangements and the potential impacts for rural and remote families and Independent RRR Schools need to be addressed to ensure there is no inadvertent negative impacts on these schools and the families they cater for.

### **Independent Regional Boarding Schools**

ICPA (Aust) represents many families whose children, due to geographical isolation, must attend Regional Independent Boarding Schools to access their secondary education. State Government-run hostels and boarding facilities are scarce and simply cannot accommodate the thousands of rural and remote students who must board away from home to access their education.

It is deeply concerning that, as the Issues Paper clearly states, the recurrent funding for schools covers in-school costs *only* and does not extend to supporting the provision of boarding. The omission of boarding support in the funding model shows a fundamental lack of consideration for rural and remote families who incur significant expenses to access an equitable education for their children with no other choice to access their education than to board away from home. ICPA (Aust) feels strongly that the cost for the provision of boarding required by geographically isolated students’ needs to be taken into consideration in conjunction with in-school costs.

ICPA (Aust) believes the impact on Independent Regional Boarding Schools as a result of this gap in funding, coupled by the Capacity to Contribute Socio Economic Status Score Methodology will result in schools having no alternative other than to increase their boarding fees, thereby diminishing even further the choice of educational options for geographically isolated students as they become unable to afford the increased expenses associated with educating their children at these schools. Furthermore, Independent Regional Boarding Schools may ultimately become unviable due to decreased enrolments, coupled with decreased funding.

To effectively ignore the boarding operations of an Independent Regional Boarding School in a school funding model, whereby schools are providing an essential facility for the rural and remote students who rely on them indicates a lack of acknowledgement by government of the importance of educational equity for geographically isolated students, and more broadly the Australian rural industry and the communities and families it services. Access to an equitable education determines the educational aspirations and outcomes for these students and is the foundation of sustainable regional, rural and remote communities.

While the Federal Government provides financial assistance to eligible geographically isolated families through the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Boarding Allowance this allowance does not adequately address the out-of-pocket expenses incurred by rural families, with the gap between the allowance and the actual cost of educating geographically isolated children in boarding schools increasing each year as school fees rise. This will be extenuated if Independent Regional Boarding Schools increase their fees to counter a decrease in funding due to the new model meaning they are not eligible for extra loading to support their operations.

### **Other considerations – Capacity to Contribute**

Whilst ICPA (Aust) recognises that this Review will not consider the Capacity to Contribute (CTC) arrangements for non-government schools, it would be remiss in its representation of rural and remote families to disregard concerns in relation to the impacts of the CTC arrangements on Independent RRR Schools and the families they cater for.

Many rural and remote families are involved in primary production industries such as agriculture. The use of taxable income to determine their capacity to contribute is an inaccurate measure for a number of reasons. Income and operating expenses within the agricultural industry are highly variable and fluctuate from year to year depending on factors such as the season and commodity prices. Many agricultural operations are private enterprises, often asset rich and cash poor and disposable income is low. Furthermore, the income of families involved in primary production is almost completely dependent on the weather, commodity prices, bushfires, drought, floods and other rural hardships which are entirely uncontrollable and unpredictable in nature. Often with family owned agricultural businesses and other rural businesses in small towns, the “income” is actually the business earnings and any profit is reinvested back into the business rather than personal income to be used by a family for other needs. Rural and remote families are in an unusual position in that their children need to source an education, which comes at a considerable cost but they have very little disposable income even in productive years.

Without due consideration of fluctuating incomes and possible inflated and inaccurate income data that the CTC arrangements may generate in relation to families involved in primary production, funding shortfalls for RRR schools may not be identified and therefore not adequately addressed in the Regional Schooling Resource Standard Loadings.

ICPA (Aust) is extremely concerned that any reduction in independent RRR school funding as a result of CTC arrangements within the new funding model will compromise the ability of schools to provide adequate resourcing such as technology requirements, specialist services and teacher professional development. The inevitable consequence will be that schools will have no other choice but to increase fees. Reduced enrolments as a result of rising school fees will inevitably make many of these schools unviable, further limiting educational choices for rural and remote students.

The “Capacity to Contribute” model does not take into account the considerable educational expenses incurred by rural and remote families due to the nature of where they live and particularly for those who have no other access to schooling other than Independent Boarding Schools. ICPA (Aust) members have indicated that their out of pocket costs for boarding after allowances range anywhere from \$10,000 to \$30,000 per child, per year, despite being in receipt of the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Boarding Allowance. These additional expenses impede upon parents "capacity to contribute", however are not taken into consideration in the funding model.

Further insight into the costs and issues that affect families in rural and remote locations, particularly when accessing secondary education for their children can be found in ICPA (Aust)’s **Boarding School Access Research for Geographically Isolated Students** conducted in 2016, please [CLICK HERE](#)

Students from geographically isolated areas are sometimes a very small percentage of an independent boarding school’s student base, and the concern is that their numbers will be watered down/distorted in any calculations or averages of school community to assess Capacity to Contribute when these rural and remote families themselves may have very little Capacity to Contribute, yet they may have the greatest challenge to access an education.

#### **Recommendations:**

1. That recurrent funding for schools be extended to include the provision of boarding to ensure the continued viability of Independent Regional Boarding Schools and the accessibility and affordability of these schools for geographically isolated students.
2. That the Capacity to Contribute methodology recognises the financial circumstances of geographically isolated families when applied to Independent RRR Schools and Independent Regional Boarding Schools which cater for geographically isolated students.

#### **Conclusion**

Safeguards are needed to ensure educational equity is not reduced for rural and remote students so that these students are still able to access Independent Regional Boarding Schools once the new methodology is implemented. It is crucial that the new funding Regional Schooling Resource Standards, in particular the CTC arrangements, do not inadvertently diminish school viability or educational choice for geographically isolated students. ICPA (Aust) believes the boarding operations in regional schools must be considered in the funding model to ensure that for those rural and remote students who rely on these boarding schools, it can remain affordable and accessible.

ICPA (Aust) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Review of the Regional Schooling Resource Standard Loadings and the recognition of the unique educational needs of this educational demographic.