

**Submission
No 57**

**SUPPORT FOR DROUGHT AFFECTED COMMUNITIES IN NEW SOUTH
WALES**

Organisation: Isolated Children's Parents' Association of NSW Inc

Date Received: 29 November 2019

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of NSW advocates for members who have children who:

- Attend a rural pre-school or access early childhood education through a mobile service
- Attend a small rural or remote school
- Study by Distance Education and School of the Air lessons
- Travel to school by bus or private vehicle (daily, weekly or at the end of term)
- Board away from home to access primary or secondary school at a boarding school, agricultural high school, hostel, private board or maintain a second home
- Attend a Tertiary institution- University/TAFE/ College

With the continuing drought, families have had to keep their children home to complete the beginning of their high school years via Distance Education instead of going to boarding school. Due to both parents being required out in the paddock at all sorts of times or working off farm to earn extra income, there is an ongoing need for isolated children to have the supervision and support of an In Home Carer.

Children aged between 12 and 15 still require some supervision, especially if at home alone in a remote location. The extension of Child Care Subsidy for In Home Care to this age group would enable parents to continue working on the farm or off farm (away from the house) without disruption to the child.

RECOMMENDATION: That the NSW Government advocate for the age criteria of Child Care Subsidy for In Home Care for isolated families be changed from 0-12 years to 0-15 years.

Families with preschool aged children who are entitled to 600 hours of preschool in the years before school, cannot afford to drive their children to preschool. Children are starting school without having accessed preschool (let alone the recommended 600 hours). It is well documented the vital role that early learning plays in a child's overall educational outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION: That preschool children who live in an area that is classified as outer regional, remote or very remote be eligible for the School Drive Subsidy.

ICPA-NSW welcomes the recent drought assistance package being offered to preschool services in drought areas. Every child, regardless of geographic isolation, deserves equitable access to education and it needs to be highlighted that every isolated child attending the School of the Air and Distance Education Preschool Services is a drought affected child. ICPA-NSW would therefore like to see the Drought Packages being extended to SOTA and DE preschool services.

RECOMMENDATION: That the June 2019 Drought package offered to preschools be extended to School of the Air and Distance Education Preschools servicing isolated families.

Case Study 1:

Broken Hill School of The Air (SOTA) Preschool hosts a two-day Preschool Classroom once a term to enable children the opportunity of face to face sessions. These face to face sessions are valuable as they identify any issues that may require early intervention. For many families this can be a round trip of over 1000kms and involves overnight accommodation. There has been a notable decline in families attending due to the drought and costs involved (up to half of those enrolled).

Case Study 2:

A mother whose child attends a preschool that has been the recipient of \$3,000 in drought funding has advised that she is considering dropping one day of preschool per week. This parent drives 160km each day the child attends preschool. The drought funding to that preschool has not allowed for any transport assistance for this child to attend.

Both Case Studies are current recipients of the Farm Household Allowance.

RECOMMENDATION: That isolated families with preschoolers who are receiving the Farm Household Allowance, be eligible for a subsidy paid once a term to assist toward the travel and accommodation costs of attending face to face preschool, as a matter of urgency.

Tertiary students from rural and remote areas incur huge expenses with regards to living away from home to study. The drought has highlighted these costs. Statistically, students from rural and remote areas who move away for Tertiary Education are more likely to gain employment in a rural and remote area when they complete their studies – such as Nurses, Doctors and Teachers - it is therefore vital that these students remain supported during their Tertiary Education.

RECOMMENDATION: That consideration be given into affordable travel subsidies for university students who live outside a metropolitan area, to attend university.

For many isolated children, Boarding School and Agricultural High School are the only options available for secondary school and ICPA-NSW has identified a need for more government boarding facilities for children in NSW, particularly for girls in the north west of the state. With the drought impacting affordability of a secondary education, ICPA-NSW would like more consideration to be given to government boarding schools in the future.

RECOMMENDATION: ICPA-NSW recommends that the NSW Government establish one or more new boarding schools in rural and regional areas of NSW, including at least one in the North West of the state which will accommodate female boarders.

As cashflows are reduced, the cost of accessing secondary education remains one of the single biggest line items in a rural or remote family's budget. The financial pressure to keep children at boarding school or indeed to start children at boarding school is causing immense stress for both parents and children.

An income contingent loan with similar terms to HECs, (repayable when income returns) designated for educational purposes would also allow farming businesses to utilise cashflow to reinvest into their businesses and therefore the local economies. The income contingent loan also means that the NSW government would have a return on their investment, not just monetary, but in the further education of children from remote and rural communities. Such a concept could also be extended to other costs, such as buying fodder. Professor Bruce Chapman, the architect of HECs, also has a model designed for Agriculture. This needs to be explored.

RECOMMENDATION: That the NSW government as a matter of urgency, consider implementing a low interest loan, with similar concept to the HECS / HELP, to those affected by drought to assist with fees associated with education.

Drought Education Costs Survey

In June 2019, ICPA-NSW conducted an online survey regarding the impact the drought is having on the costs of educating children.

There were 219 respondents, over a 7 day period:

- 95% respondents are struggling with the enormity of drought and the costs of education
- 17% of respondents have held off sending their children away to boarding school, with the only other choice for many being Distance Education for Secondary.
- 5% of respondents have pulled their child out of boarding school – Families indicated many schools are assisting them with financial payment plans, bursaries and scholarships for children currently enrolled at the boarding schools.
- 36% of respondents are already on boarding school payment plans. Others are increasing the overdraft, borrowing from family, working off farm or working extra jobs to keep their children educated.
- 15% of respondents are considering separating the family and moving to town to set up a second home. 1% have already done this and moved to town.
- 70% of families are not participating in extracurricular activities due to the drought – weekend sport, music lessons etc.

ICPA-NSW calls on the NSW Government to consider real solutions that assist rural and remote families with education costs during drought and other natural disasters. ICPA-NSW would like to assist the NSW Government with a forming future policy that includes reference to education. The very real and immediate concern is that once families cannot afford educating their children, they will leave and never return to these areas – and where does that leave the future of Agriculture?