

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to the

Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee Inquiry

on the

Australian Education Amendment

(Direct Measure of Income) Bill 2020 [Provisions]

from the

Federal Council

of the

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

ICPA (Aust)

March 2020

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The Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Australian Education Amendment (Direct Measure of Income) Bill 2020 [Provisions]. 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.

KEY POINTS

1. Many rural and remote students have no option but to board for Middle Years/Secondary School.
2. Government-run hostels or boarding facilities are scarce and do not suit the needs of many students/families.
3. Many rural and remote students must necessarily board at regional and metropolitan independent boarding schools to access middle years/secondary schooling.
4. Application of the Direct Measure of Income model and provisions could significantly impact the accessibility and affordability of middle years/secondary schooling for rural and remote boarding students through:
 - affecting the viability of boarding schools essential to education for rural and remote students
 - increases in boarding fees further exacerbating financial challenges for rural and remote families, especially families affected by drought, floods and fires
 - inappropriateness of using the fluctuating taxable incomes of primary producers and farm-reliant businesses
 - ‘capacity to contribute’ does not consider other considerable educational expenses incurred by rural and remote families apart from school fees such as travel, extra-curricular activities, siblings’ educational costs, distance education costs
 - The collective ‘capacity to contribute’ of parents’ in many independent boarding/day schools will be skewed by metropolitan families at the expense of the smaller rural and remote cohort.

EXPLANATION

Many rural and remote students have limited secondary schooling options available to them as many have no reasonable daily access to age appropriate schooling where they live. While 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 and in NSW there are only 3 government boarding schools. It is not just “property/station” children who go away to boarding school. 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 achieve successful outcomes, 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.

ICPA (Aust) is concerned that the new school funding arrangement will significantly impact on the students and families we represent. These students often need to attend independent boarding schools to access adequate daily education. While the government maintains that the new funding

methodology will provide every child with a quality education, regardless of where they live and what school they attend, the impact of this new funding model will have on independent regional boarding schools and in turn how this will affect the rural and remote students and families they cater for is concerning.

Across all states there are relatively few government-run boarding school options available to students, which leaves most having to rely on independent or private boarding schools to educate their children when no school is available to them within a reasonable distance. There is limited availability of State run hostels and many only offer Monday-Friday boarding which is problematic for the majority of boarders who must travel long distances.

ICPA (Aust) believes that the following considerations need to be taken into account when applying the Direct Measure of Income model and provisions made to address these:

- The ongoing viability of independent schools that rural and remote families rely on to educate their children is at risk. Using gross income may reduce the funding to these schools which in turn may see schools become unviable or alternatively result in raising their school fees (schools are businesses and though they are for the most part extremely supportive of their rural and remote boarders, they do still need to be able to maintain their business). It has already been highlighted to ICPA (Aust) that some regional schools are already seeing a significant decrease in their funding allocation due to this methodology.
- For rural and remote families who have limited access to schooling other than independent boarding schools, an increase in fees may make an education even further out of reach for students from rural and remote areas as families are unable to afford the increased fees. This would be exacerbated by the effects of drought and other rural hardships on families when they are already struggling to pay fees to continue their children's compulsory education.
- Using the taxable income of agricultural families is inaccurate due to fluctuating incomes and environmental factors impacting upon these incomes. Gross income for rural families is not always an accurate measure of available funds for these families. Farming families with a six-figure gross income, may actually have a very low or negative net income because of the expenses of production, or drought and other industry impacts.
- For rural families who have no other access to schooling other than independent boarding schools, expenses outside of school fees for educating geographically isolated students are considerable and impede upon parents "capacity to contribute". The new school funding methodology does not take these expenses into consideration.
- Many boarding schools only have a small percentage of rural and remote students in their enrolments, and these students' families income and "Capacity to Contribute" may be diluted by the larger numbers of other students' families at the same school who may have very different income earning situations than their rural counterparts. A true indication of a geographically isolated family's income and their ability to contribute may not be reflected in figures obtained across the wider school community.

Further insight into costs and issues that affect families in rural and remote locations when accessing secondary education for their children can be found in ICPA (Aust) **Boarding School Access Research for Geographically Isolated Students** conducted in 2016
<https://www.icpa.com.au/page/attachment/94/final-boarding-school-survey-icpa-aust-with-comments-2016>

The unique needs and circumstances of geographically isolated students who, due to lack of access to appropriate education, must board away from home at independent non-government schools to access secondary education should be addressed when applying the Capacity to Contribute Socio-Economic Status Score Methodology. If this methodology is applied and results in schools which cater

for geographically isolated students becoming unviable or having to significantly increase their fees, this will put access to education for these students even further out of reach. Safeguards need to be put into place to ensure rural and remote students are able to continue their education without additional burden and cost to their families. Currently the Commonwealth Government's Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Allowance provides some assistance to rural and remote families to be able to cover the costs of educating their students through boarding, however the gap between this allowance and boarding fees grows each year and this allowance does not contribute towards the cost of tuition which is an additional cost for rural and remote families as non-government schools which offer boarding also incur a tuition cost. 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, depending on where students live or allowance/scholarship that may be available. If the Capacity to Contribute Socio-Economic Status Score Methodology is imposed resulting in schools further increasing their fees, then it is imperative the government make provision to increase the AIC to assist geographically isolated families to educate their children and lessen their unsustainable out of pocket costs.

ICPA (Aust) firmly believes that the Capacity to Contribute Socio-Economic Status Score Methodology, as it currently stands, will have an extensive impact on rural and remote families when applied to independent, non-government boarding schools that many of our member families rely on to access education for their children. ICPA (Aust) feels that appropriate provisions need to be put in place to limit these impacts and urges the government to take into consideration the limited education choice that geographically isolated students have, their need to access boarding schools in order to obtain an education and their families' limited capacity to pay which may not be reflected in statistics gathered through the wider school community.