



# Submission

to the

## Commonwealth Government Covid-19 Response Inquiry

from the

Federal Council

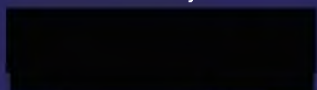
of the

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

ICPA (Aust)

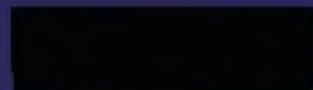
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Kim Hughes  
Federal Secretary



Tel: [REDACTED]

Louise Martin  
Federal President



Tel: [REDACTED]



The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA Aust) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, apolitical, national parent organisation which advocates on behalf of our members for equity of access to an appropriate education for all geographically isolated children and students, from early childhood through to tertiary. Most member families of the Association reside in geographically isolated areas of Australia and all share a common goal of achieving equitable access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this. Students whose family home is in rural and remote Australia, often live vast distances from services required to support the education of these students.

ICPA (Aust) will be focused on addressing the impacts of COVID-19 governance on the education of rural and remote students, from early childhood education through to tertiary and training.

### BOARDING INSTITUTIONS

ICPA (Aust) fully supports the necessity of restrictions when navigating ongoing pandemic conditions, and understands measures are required to keep communities safe, however uncertainty and inconsistency caused by State and Federal Government policy had serious impacts on the wellbeing of geographically isolated families and their children who access their education via boarding school due to the distance from daily schooling. Case studies detailing the experiences of this already disadvantaged and vulnerable cohort as a result of government policies during the pandemic are attached as **Appendix A**.

#### **Boarding school staff not classified as Essential Supervisory Staff**

Sending children to boarding school comes not only at a financial cost, but also at an emotional cost, as families entrust the care of their children to the staff employed in boarding houses at the schools they attend. For such a vulnerable cohort of children, some as young as 11, the quality and availability of this staff cannot be understated.

Boarding schools cannot effectively operate and therefore satisfactorily care for the children residing within them without the services of essential personnel such as boarding staff, kitchen staff and cleaning staff. During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic however, some health authorities would not consider that all the boarding school staff were in fact essential workers. While teachers were considered essential workers, boarding schools are very different school settings and require more than teachers to be operational and to meet the emotional and wellbeing needs of their students.

#### **Rural and remote boarding students and their immediate families not classified as "Essential Travellers"**

Geographically isolated students already face a range of barriers to accessing education, however the COVID-19 pandemic extenuated this disadvantage, in particular for those children who attend boarding school 'across the border', in another state or territory. Border restrictions enforced by states and territories, were tumultuous, inconsistent and confusing. Many rural and remote students and their families were placed under undue stress when state border closures prevented students returning home or returning to a boarding facility, preventing them from being able to access their education. Some students were unable to return to school for months, without structured remote learning as other students at the school had returned to face-to-face learning. Others had to undergo 14-day quarantine alone, many more than once. In some instances students were separated from home and families for up to six months due to the restrictions, just to attend school.

The results of these border closures and restrictions resulted in painful separation, disruption, angst and mental health challenges for rural and remote boarding students and their families.



ICPA (Aust) welcomed the creation of a National Code for Boarding School Students in late 2021, with all states and territories agreeing to adopt the principles of the Code. This Code acknowledged that geographically isolated families have the unique ability to isolate in ways that urban families cannot and therefore provided guidelines for which, within their unique circumstances, travel could be undertaken safely. However, despite the national assent to the Guidelines outlined in the Code, implementation by state jurisdictions remained inconsistent, further increasing the stress and uncertainty of travel and education plans for rural and remote families.

### **COVID-19 Management Plans in school boarding houses**

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, already vulnerable and disadvantaged geographically isolated boarding students were severely impacted by conditions imposed and measures implemented at various levels to limit the spread of the virus in boarding schools. As the COVID pandemic continued into 2022, ICPA (Aust) members shared many experiences of boarding students who, despite sharing classes with day students who returned home daily with freedoms to come and go from school and in the community, endured inconsistent, unjustifiable and stifling guidelines, processes and restrictions within the boarding house to limit the spread of the virus. These circumstances placed this already vulnerable cohort at a further disadvantage compared to their non-boarding peers, proving detrimental to their emotional and social wellbeing.

ICPA (Aust) members called for a pragmatic and balanced approach to the implementation of COVID-19 management plans in school boarding houses which considered the emotional wellbeing of geographically isolated children, however in many cases this was not achieved in the response to the pandemic.

### **Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Allowance**

The families ICPA (Aust) represent reside in geographically isolated locations which requires many of their children to access compulsory education via distance education, boarding or by living in a second home. The Federal Government provides the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Allowance to assist with extra expenses incurred as a result of these circumstances. With various impacts to their educational circumstances as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic ICPA (Aust) were pleased that as a result of our advocacy, AIC allowances were continued unchanged, regardless of the various educational challenges endured by families during the pandemic. ICPA (Aust) welcomed this decision as recognition of the unique circumstances, needs and challenges of geographically isolated students and their families.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Should any future similar circumstances be experienced as occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, relevant authorities recognise boarding school staff as “Essential Supervisory Staff” for the crucial roles they perform in caring for our vulnerable rural and remote students.
- A nationally consistent, compassionate approach to ensuring rural and remote students can access an equitable education within Australia, regardless of state borders. Essential traveller exemptions would help ensure that students would be able to access their place of education with relative ease and mean that families could transport students to and from school and also be able to see their children, avoiding unnecessary and heart-breaking periods of family separation.
- The implementation of a balanced approach to risk management within boarding situations, where risks can be mitigated without disproportionate constraints on boarding students to ameliorate inadvertent impacts on the emotional wellbeing of our vulnerable rural and remote children.
- That any decisions made by governments during times such as the COVID-19 pandemic consider and provide for the unique circumstances, needs and challenges of geographically isolated families.



## DISTANCE EDUCATION

### Communications

Many of the families which ICPA (Aust) represent undertake full-time home learning, which we commonly refer to as geographically isolated distance education (GIDE), particularly in primary years, due to the nature of where they reside. Systems and processes put in place by governments to assist with the delivery of this distance education generally work effectively for the delivery of education to these remote students. However, during the pandemic when more schools, staff and students commenced using these platforms, regular GIDE students faced interruptions to their schooling as online platforms struggled to meet demand. In Queensland for example, when broad home schooling commenced in term two of 2020 due to the pandemic, the increased usage of the state based online learning platform caused the system to collapse, leaving all students, including those GIDE students who regularly utilise the platform, without access to their learning. Positively however, changes and in particular increases to provision of internet services, proved helpful for GIDE families.

### Other

GIDE families reside in some of the most remote locations in Australia and experience ongoing isolation in their day to day lives. As a result of processes and procedures implemented during and following the pandemic, some GIDE families experienced increased isolation as distance education schools cancelled already infrequent face to face activities. In some circumstances, even once mainstream schools had mostly returned to normal, distance education schools were still implementing isolation procedures. One school in Queensland would not allow parents on site until well into 2022. Unfortunately, in some cases the changes to face to face activities as a result of COVID-19 has resulted in some distance education schools failing to return to their pre-COVID-19 activity schedule.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Decisions and policies made in situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic should recognise and cater for families who undertake geographically isolated distance education (GIDE), particularly in the primary years due to the nature of where they reside and the lack of access to any other schooling alternative.
- GIDE students should not be made more isolated than their mainstream peers.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

The impacts of Federal Government COVID-19 policy concerning early childhood education and care served to highlight the fact that rural and remote early childhood education and care is unique and therefore requires a standalone approach to providing support for remote families. During the pandemic, unlike most metropolitan families who were not accessing child care, many rural and remote families continued to require child care services as a result of the nature of their work and livelihoods. The Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package, with its provision of about 50% funding for services, significantly impacted on In Home Care and Family Day Care services in rural and remote areas where there was not a reduction in children requiring child care, hence providers had to look elsewhere for extra funding to pay their current educators properly. While additional payments became available for eligible providers and educators, several issues arose:

- misunderstanding and lengthy application and approval processes
- rejection of applications and
- In Home Care providers not employing replacement, new or extra educators for rural and remote families.

Therefore many families were left without child care despite their needs remaining as they were before COVID-19.



Accessing educators was also problematic due to state and territory border restrictions, meaning limited workforce availability in remote locations.

The impacts outlined in The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children in Australian early childhood education and care - A rapid review prepared for the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment January 2022, related to the effects of isolation and lack of access to ECEC services are indicative of everyday impacts lived by rural and remote children who, because of where they live and the abhorrent lack of ECEC service provided, never get access to quality ECEC before starting their compulsory schooling.

Case studies attached as **Appendix B** show the myriad of issues experienced by ICPA (Aust) members while trying to access In Home Care to continue their work on a rural station during the COVID-19 period.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

A specifically rural and remote ECEC strategy and programs to allow decisions to be relevant and responsive to the unique needs of these families and children.

## **RURAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS**

### **Technology**

In rural and remote schools, the rapid introduction of online learning in schools imposed by state governments during COVID-19 lockdowns, hinged upon the existing technology skill sets of staff and students and the availability of adequate resources to be able to deliver a fully online curriculum.

Remote schools have been faced with unique challenges and circumstances in regard to staffing, resources and often telecommunications. For example, in some states, issues with internet connection occurred because school staff had limited understanding of their connections and could not directly contact their providers to gain assistance as this had to be done by the state education department. This caused delays in some cases for schools to access assistance to set up online teaching. For many of the smaller rural schools where principals also teach, the additional obligations of preparing for remote learning became a significant challenge and burden to maintain. In many cases, lack of internet connection or technology resources, along with limited student (and parent/carer) technology skills at home hindered the ability of students to complete online learning. Challenges also arose in the provision of required resources and learning when technology and equipment was not working or required repairs.

### **Teachers/Staff**

States such as Western Australia that implemented strict internal border restrictions created an environment where teachers were unsure if they would be able to travel home from remote locations for holiday times or be nearby family members in other zones if required. As a result, teachers in some remote schools left their rural/remote teaching positions and these schools were left with staffing shortages.

Teachers were also expected to have pre-prepared lessons available in the event that they or a family member became ill and were unable to attend a face to face or virtual lesson. In addition teachers were in many cases expected to provide and monitor student work for those students at home who were isolating, or in some cases teach a virtual class and an online class at the same time. This was a huge effort from teachers, students and carers already burdened with an extra and unusual workload in challenging times. Maintaining a teacher for every class during the COVID period was difficult. This was exacerbated by specialist teachers, parents, support staff and other helpers who are often relied upon in rural and remote schools, not being able to attend the schools for extended periods. Children with special needs and their teachers found this time especially challenging due to the unique needs of this cohort.



If a teacher became ill or tested positive, they were not permitted to attend school for the length of their isolation period, which was forever changing as new information about the pandemic became available. The rules for non-attendance if a child or teacher tested positive to COVID-19 and the reporting and compliance required by teachers and admin was confusing, time consuming and ever changing.

### **School Environment**

School events such as sports carnivals and camps were cancelled or postponed as a result of the pandemic conditions meaning children missed out on important educational experiences. Further, schools were required to implement social distancing and other control conditions including segregation and mask wearing which were often unclear and non-sensical and caused challenges for staff and students. These challenges extended to school bus requirements and boarding environments.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Recognition by governments that teaching online is a specialised skill and that teacher training universities implement online teaching best practice modules to upskill teachers in this very specialised delivery method.
- Education Departments dedicate a specialised team to assist teachers with the online delivery of lessons and technical implementation of its delivery should the need ever arise in the future.
- The unique circumstances of rural and remote schools need to be taken into consideration when blanket policy is imposed and rural and remote school communities be given the autonomy to guide their school through pandemic regulations. For example:
  - Every rural and remote school is in a different location and has different students with many different needs. Blanket restrictions are sometimes not relevant to individual schools and their students and can make the teaching and learning experience unworkable for teachers, parents and students.
  - Rural and remote schools have a teacher and student management plan that can be implemented and takes into consideration the isolation of students in classrooms, playgrounds and bus travel.
  - Management plans be developed on minimum staff operating levels in rural and remote schools including specific directives should regional boundaries be implemented resulting in staff effectively “stuck” in or out of their place of employment.
  - That the administration of pandemic “rules” in rural and remote schools be limited as much as possible to allow these schools and teachers to and organise and manage their classrooms autonomously.

### **TERTIARY**

ICPA (Aust) was appreciative of the measures that supported rural and remote tertiary students during the COVID 19 pandemic including:

- **Gap year students** – particularly students who were in their gap year when the pandemic hit. These students were affected by the economic impacts of COVID-19, job losses and decreased employment opportunities impacting their capacity to earn the required 75% of the National Training Wage in their nominated 14-month period to fulfil their working criteria to demonstrate independence for Youth Allowance (student) and ABSTUDY.
  - The provision that young people from regional and remote areas who are qualifying for Youth Allowance as an independent under the Concessional Workforce Independence Criteria (CWIC) were automatically considered, for the six-month period between 25 March and 24 September 2020 to have earned 75 per cent of the National Training Wage Schedule weekly rate (unless in receipt of a higher income) or worked 15 hours per week.



- The announcement that a temporary pathway for young people planning on taking a working gap year in 2021, who earn at least \$15,000 through agricultural work during the period 30 November 2020 and 31 December 2021 will be considered independent for Youth Allowance (student) and ABSTUDY.
- **Youth Allowance application**
  - **Confirming identity** - During the COVID-19 pandemic, the provision that allowed applicants to use their myGov account to confirm their identity, receive a Centrelink Reference Number (CRN), create a Centrelink online account, link their Centrelink online account to myGov and make their claim online.
    - Many rural and remote applicants are unable to reasonably attend a service centre due to the tyranny of distance. This provision addressed the difficulty many rural and remote students and families have with initial proof of identity that results in delays in applications, approval and commencement of YA payments.
      - **Waiver of the liquid assets waiting period** for Youth Allowance and Austudy
      - **Removal of the personal assets test for Youth Allowance, ABSTUDY and Austudy** - which streamlined the application for youth allowance and allowed timely progression of the application.
- **Supplementary payments**
  - Australian tertiary students and apprentices in receipt of a student payment through Centrelink who were eligible for the extra payments: *Economic Support Payment* and *Coronavirus Supplement* provided the student remained enrolled and planned to return to study even if self-isolated at home or their education provider temporarily closed or reduced their study load still received their payments.
  - For Australian Apprentices the continuation of their fortnightly payment if they had a current Australian Apprenticeship Commonwealth Registration Number AND maintained their term address even if they were self-isolating or their employer temporarily closed.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

That during any event such as the COVID-19 pandemic, these above measures are re-instated in a timely manner to alleviate resultant impacts on students commencing or continuing a tertiary education.

#### **TRAINING**

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the inception of the Coronavirus Supplement for those apprentices and trainees who were eligible for a Centrelink payment such as Youth Allowance.

However, Australian Apprentices and trainees who were not receiving a Centrelink payment already, such as those ineligible for Youth Allowance and receiving the Commonwealth Living Away From Home Allowance payment instead, were ineligible for the Coronavirus Supplement. This was despite the LAFHA being a payment to rural and remote Australian Apprentices and trainees who must move away from home to access their apprentice or traineeship.

While the Australian Government's Supporting Apprentices and Trainees wage subsidy was welcomed, this subsidy was paid directly to small or medium business rather than the apprentice and was hindered by eligibility requirements and waiting times. LAFHA recipients who were ineligible for the Coronavirus Supplement and could not access the Supporting Apprentices and Trainees wage subsidy in a timely



manner, had no financial assistance available to them despite the impacts of COVID-19 on their employment which included significantly reduced working hours with no extra financial support other than what their parents could provide. This situation was exacerbated further if their employer was not eligible for JobKeeper. Many could not maintain their apprenticeships or traineeships. Apprentice and traineeship wages are already low and COVID-19 induced cuts to their hours and wages proved unsustainable as they were already enduring the high cost of living expenses associated with living away from home.

Loss of income due to COVID-19 was exacerbated for rural and remote apprentices and trainees as they were often living hundreds of kilometres away from the family home, were required to isolate when not at work, and had lost their support network as many of their friends and peers (e.g. room mates) who were studying or working in other fields had returned home to their family due to the pandemic.

A case study from an ICPA family is attached as **Appendix C**.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

That all rural and remote apprentices and trainees who must live away from home to access their vocational training are adequately supported when an event like COVID-19 impacts their income and work.

**School students undertaking Vocational Education and Training (VET)**

VET students were incredibly challenged during the pandemic to meet the mandated work placement hours for school or externally delivered VET courses. In New South Wales 2 unit x 2 year VET Frameworks course students are required by the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) to undertake 70 hours of workplace learning over the two years of the course. For students in lockdown this was incredibly difficult to achieve, particularly in environments such as hospitality and childcare, and added to the challenges they experienced, and not achieving the work placement hours resulted in their Higher School Certificate being held back until the VET requirements were addressed.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

That in a situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic alternate provisions are promptly made for school students undertaking Vocational Education and Training (VET) to meet the required mandated work placement hours.

**CONCLUSION**

ICPA (Aust) is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry and look forward to the positive outcomes for rural and remote students, families and communities.

ICPA (Aust) is more than happy to provide additional information on any of the topics that have been raised.





## Appendix

### APPENDIX A – BOARDING INSTITUTION CASE STUDIES

#### South Australian Family 1

Regarding the boarding school my son attends I am currently very satisfied with their approach to the SA Health guidelines. The boarding house makes every effort to keep us up to date with current Covid restrictions and guidelines and consistently alerts us to the actual situation in the boarding house regarding Covid cases.

However, I believe the SA Health guidelines currently in place are unrealistic to the boy's boarding situation. I believe the panel writing these guidelines and restrictions needs to have a boarding parent body present to enable a realistic student perspective.

Currently the definition of a household situation extends to the wing of a boarding house (if the wing contains a kitchen unit), this places a huge burden on the boarding house and its students. It is unrealistic to place entire wings under isolation when one student receives a positive Covid test. This potentially opens the wings to constant isolation as a wing can house up to 20+ boys. To explain the scenario, I pose two situations here:

1. One boy in the boarding house receives a positive test to Covid, the entire wing he resides in undergoes isolation. Upon completion of the week of isolation the boy's bedroom buddy then tests positive. Groundhog Day for the wing of boys as they are consequently placed into another week of isolation.
2. One boy in the boarding house receives a positive test to Covid, the entire wing he resides in undergoes isolation. Boys from that wing then return to school only for one of the boys from that wing to then catch Covid from a classmate. The entire wing is back in isolation for another week, Groundhog Day.

Thus, the logistics of the current measures the SA Health Covid restrictions have placed on boarding houses are unrealistic and need to be reassessed. It is not fair or reasonable to think these boys will be able to administer their own schooling throughout these stints of isolation. Ultimately, this may become a humanitarian situation as the boy's mental and emotional wellbeing regarding their education and freedom will be jeopardized.

I suggest SA Health reviews the definition of a household in relation to a boarding house, as the present definition creates too large a scope.

I would like to express my gratitude to the boarding house my son attends as their approach to the unfolding situation is to be commended.

#### South Australian Family 2

We live at [REDACTED] We qualify for isolated children boarding under distance. My daughter is a year 11 boarder in Adelaide. I have a few concerns regarding the current boarding house rules in SA and am worried about the disadvantage this impacts on my daughter's education and wellbeing.

We dropped my daughter to school last Tuesday and then due to a Year 10 Boarder testing positive on Thursday, and deemed a close contact, we had to pick our daughter up. This is an 850km one way journey. We left Thursday night, got to [REDACTED] at 1am and booked into some accommodation. Left Friday



morning, picked her up around 10am and then drove straight home to Penong. Obviously this was an unexpected and unnecessary trip and placed us under physical and mental strain as well as financial impact.

My daughter can go back to the boarding house today, but if another girl tests positive in any of the routine testing this will happen again.

I am particularly concerned about the impact this will have on my daughter's educational outcomes. Whilst this week online lessons were provided, that finishes today, so any further isolation periods the children will be missing face to face lessons for a whole week or more depending on transport options. (This only implies to boarders, as day students who are deemed classroom contacts are still able to attend school with no isolation or testing requirements.)

Boarding houses should have the same rules as schools to lessen the disadvantage for rural and remote students.

### SA Family 3

I have 2 students who are boarders at [REDACTED]. My son is in Year 12 and my daughter is in Year 9. I would like it to be known that I fully support [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] boarding staff. I acknowledge that the rules our school are implementing are being created by and approved by the Principal and Deputy Principal with and I shall be blunt, statistical outcomes rather than human effects.

Here is my feedback regarding how the [REDACTED] Boarding house has interpreted and implemented the SAPOL Directives and SA Health Guidelines that are related to boarding schools.

- Masks are required to be worn in every part of boarding house apart from outside areas by both staff and students.
- Students are not permitted to enter another students' room unless they are sharing a room with that student. This is being enforced heavily and the punishment is an instant gating.
- Prep is now being undertaken individually in each students' rooms. They have the opportunity to ask for assistance from a tutor or the DHOB but this is only on a 1 on 1 basis and is first come first served.
- There is no access to snacks other than fruit and afternoon tea and can only be given out by staff.
- Students are being asked not to 'linger' in common spaces.
- Day leave is only for 30 minutes and there is a clear list of where they can and cannot go.
- No overnight leave is permitted unless with immediate family or in a specialised case leave can be granted to someone outside of immediate family, but they must be approved by HOB.
- Rapid Antigen Testing on students on Monday's, Wednesday's and Friday's.
- No visitors are allowed into boarding house.
- Staggered meals times and eating outside for dinner and breakfast.

My response to the above rules and how my child(ren) are coping are as follows:

- The mask mandate is probably the least bothersome rule and my two are coping with this ok. It is interesting to note that residents in nursing homes are not required to wear a mask anywhere in their facility. It is also important to note that day students are not required to wear a mask in their own loungerooms watching telly.



- Not being able to move about between rooms I think has been very unsettling for my daughter. Girls are very tactile and enjoy being able to share news, new purchases, gossip and so on and so on.
- Not being able to have group prep is having the most profound effect on my daughter and it's only been 4 days. She struggles with some of her learning and often requires help for maths and science tasks. She is a shy person which means she does not like to be forceful and that has meant that 3 nights running she has not got in in time to get some one-on-one help for her homework and basically spent 2 of those 3 nights crying in her room because she didn't understand what to do. Group prep I believe one of the most important parts of (and a big reason why I chose boarding) the students time in boarding and their learning.
- The day leave time limit is ridiculous and makes even going to the local supermarket for essentials almost impossible. I am aware that many other schools have no limit at all and that the direction around leave does not indicate any time limit rather for the students to avoid large public gatherings. Going to the Sushi bar to eat outside on [REDACTED] is hardly a large public gathering.
- I cannot see why visitors cannot be permitted to visit provided they complete a negative RAT test on arrival and wear a mask. This is the protocol for nursing homes. During this distressing time, a friendly face might mean a big deal to a homesick student.

The guidelines that are being created by SA Health are, in my opinion, based on statistics and infection rates rather than the actual young adults who are living with these rules. I realise that schools are then implementing these guidelines with the mind to keep their students safe and think they are doing the right thing, but I also believe that perhaps they cannot see the forest for the trees. There appears to be a lot of difference in interpretation of the guidelines across all the different boarding schools and one would assume that the reason behind this is the personal opinion of those making the rules influencing their decision making. Deep down I think the school and their leaders are trying to minimise the impact it will have on the school rather than completely thinking through the long-term effects that these rules will have on the students. Their mental health is just as important as their physical health and I truly believe that it will be far more difficult to manage the breakdown of the mental health of boarders than it will be to manage Covid infections.

#### NSW Family 1

We are living in a Border prison, not a border bubble. Our address says NSW but we work, shop, see doctors, go to school in Qld, our closest place to our residence. We apply fortnightly for border passes unless the rules change then we need to apply again.

At the border we are treated like criminals getting the third degree, where are we going, why are we going and if you're lucky you are let in because all the checkpoint officers have a different interpretation of the rules or they could be just having a bad day. They take our pictures and even have us followed in town.

We are in a border prison, only do what you went for, don't stop to visit friends, don't visit family, don't go to the gym, don't go to the cafe, even the end of school year formal is in doubt.

Boarding students cannot go home if they want to finish the school year yet still they have more chance of catching covid in QLD than their home town/farm.

We live in fear someone from out of town will bring covid in, making crossing the border nearly impossible and not able to go to work or school.



We cannot travel outside of our NSW “bubble” or we lose any possibility of crossing over for work or doctors.

Anxiety is sky high. The rules keep changing. We keep adhering to these ever-changing rules only to see the rules don’t apply to outsiders who live nowhere near the border.

There is no support for us, even some in our local communities don’t care as long as they have their freedom. The stress is too much to bear and unless you are living in this nightmare you will never understand what it is like.

We are in a Border prison not a border bubble. It is time we had time out for good behaviour.

#### NT Family 1

We have 4 kids away at school on boarding in Sydney. One going currently doing HSC. All children are fully vaccinated. I have already done one quarantine stint end last term to get them home for holidays as they had been in Sydney for the previous holidays. due to COVID. At present I have kept the youngest child, who is in Year Seven. He has not been back at all since end of term 2. It is not looking like the yr 12 one will get home for Christmas as by the time she finishes all the Year 12 wind-up (formal/ graduation) she will not have enough time to do quarantine in time for Christmas day. Fortunately I have my mother in Sydney to take her as she has done for a lot of this year. I can absolutely quarantine them at home as we have plenty of extra buildings to isolate them in -we are isolated [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]

#### NT Family 2

Our only child is in regional Victoria and unable to return to his [REDACTED] home. We refuse to detain him for 2 weeks in [REDACTED]. Such a policy for children is draconian and unnecessary. He left to have a break from [REDACTED] High School nine months ago, also having his [REDACTED] birthday in Victoria. He was ready to return home, plane booked, when the NT government declared all of Victoria a hotspot.

The NT pilot program was nothing more than distraction that further cruels children and families from regional and remote communities.

We, like every other family [REDACTED] dearly miss our child and worry for his welfare. He no longer plays sport and attends school infrequently.

My requests for answers from Government are met with sympathy and the glib response “we have to keep everyone safe” Surely a mature Territory Government could do both, especially where children are concerned. They have a Federal Minster’s Guidelines.

#### NT Family 3

We live [REDACTED] We have two girls at boarding school in SA Both the girls and everyone who lives and works on the station are fully vaccinated. We will run into problems with home quarantine for the following reasons:

- The [REDACTED] has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the NT and even Australia.
- Our Station has 3G mobile coverage not 4G



- We have all done the right thing (the children as well as all of our staff) by all being fully vaccinated early, but the low rates in the [REDACTED] will let us down.
- Yet again we are let down by the fact that we have poor mobile service. We provide the 3G phone coverage we have at our cost not the NT government.
- Reading the criteria it seems if you live in a community with a health centre, 4G service and police station you will be granted an exemption. But not if you live on a remote cattle station where everyone is vaccinated, due to the lack of mobile coverage.

### WA Family 1

During the covid years I had two children attending boarding school in Perth. Both my husband and I were also boarders in our high school years as well as our three children, so we are very familiar with the general boarding school experience.

Most importantly, the dedication and care the boarding school staff showed always went way beyond what should be expected of them in very uncertain times. The timely communications and reassurance's that the boarding school staff gave to the students and parents was also commendable.

However, the real-world logistics of parenting a child in boarding, mainly because of the government regulations were distressing at best and often challenged my decisions at keeping my children in boarding, but there weren't any real alternatives if they were to continue with schooling. One child was in year 12 in 2020 and one in year 9. Our eldest was in his second year at university in the same city as their boarding house.

I'd like to highlight some of the difficulties boarding students faced during the covid years.

- Being isolated in their rooms when not at school – yet they were able to go to class with day students.
- Boarders being isolated in the playground and during recess and lunch breaks from day students.
- The wearing of masks at school and in the boarding house unless they were in their isolated rooms. For the younger students that shared a room they were required to wear a mask at all times.
- The stopping of all sports, yet their day student peers could attend.
- Isolation wings in the boarding house so if you tested positive you were sent there till you were picked up by a carer.
- The requirement to provide the name of a responsible adult to collect your child within hours if they did test positive. (Asking a lot of a friend and who wanted to ask grandma given the apparent risks to the elderly)
- Parents were not allowed to enter the boarding house for about a year. No unpacking of bags or making beds which is such an important settling in ritual for children and parents alike.
- Orientation rituals with parents and students were put on hold and often not revisited.
- On one occasion a lockdown was announced by the Premier and parents were asked to collect their children asap. Due to boarder restrictions, there was a limited time to enter the Perth zone and return home within the timeframe. This meant that long hours during the night were spent driving on country roads.

I'd like to hope that governments, especially the Health and Education departments both federally and state have learnt a lot from the Covid 19 Pandemic. I hope that if there was ever to be a pandemic like this again that the wellbeing of a student and their often geographically isolated and distant parents are considered due to their unique needs. No parent sends their child to boarding school to be masked up and locked in their rooms. No parent should be denied access to their child as they are possibly a carrier of a virus, or a close contact of someone who was or maybe was?



I think that the policies that some boarding schools were forced to impose on their students by various government departments had far worse mental health outcomes than physical ones.

### Family Case Study

Dropping our son back at boarding school was such a different experience this year. This is our seventh year of boarding and this has been the hardest one yet.

With our son in year 12 it was a bit of a relief to be able to send him to school straight away so that he started the year off on the right foot. Once we got there though it was a bit of a shock that we were not allowed past the front door and although my son has been to boarding school for five years, it still did not feel right as a mother, to leave him at the front door with all of his belongings and not help him settle into his room. But at least he had done it previously, the heartbreaking thing was to see the first-time boarders, the ones I saw in year seven, waving off their son for the first time from the front door, who had no idea how things in boarding flow. It was extremely hard to watch.

Interviews with boarding leaders for our son's wellbeing for the rest of the year were conducted on the footpath with a parade of parents and students going past and no privacy.

The first week in boarding was running smoothly until our son was a close contact with a day boy. Three of his friends in the boarding house were then put into a seven-day isolation lockdown to their rooms, with no outside contact or leave allowed. All communication was through email and phone with boarding house staff and no support with their schoolwork. They were not allowed outside and were only allowed to communicate with those boys in isolation. The next week one of those boys came back with a positive test, so our son has had to start his seven days of isolation again. The thought of spending another seven days locked in his room left him in utter despair, so we had organised for him and his friend to isolate on their own in a house we have provided with meals delivered to the house, at least they are able to get some fresh air and space other than their room.

All leave for boarding boys has been cancelled and sport reduced, but it is not the same for the boys in the day school, who can come and go as they please. This did not help in any way with our son being a close contact with the day boy.

So far, his year 12 experience has been less than ideal. The boarding house I guess are trying to keep their options open, but it is hard with so many different conflicting rules and regulations.



## APPENDIX B – EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE CASE STUDIES

### Case Study One - Impacts of Relief Childcare Package on Remote In Home Care Families

#### 28 April 2020

Our Service Provider has at this stage (2 days prior to payment due to Educators) been unsuccessful in securing relief package funding and does not have sufficient funds to pay Educators.

They have proposed an alternative package in conjunction with FDCA and Deloitte based on the percentage of revenue each Educator contributes to the Service Provider. Although I appreciate this is the most equitable solution from their standpoint, it does not at all take into account the value of these remarkable young ladies to our families.

IHC has also stated they will look at reducing the approved hours for Educators. This again does not transfer in a practical perspective to the Educators' positions with families. A family's circumstance has not changed – we still require care and assistance for our children, now more than ever with many families having children home from boarding school whilst still running a business.

The full cost of care will not be transferred to our Educators in this fortnight's payment. I fully intend to compensate my employee personally for the shortfall in the payment from IHC. At this stage we have no indication of the gap payment, but this may cause significant financial strain for many rural families requiring In Home Care, with a proposed end date of 28 June suggested.

I am truly disheartened to see this relief package unintentionally failing our rural families. I appreciate that this package was rolled out almost overnight in very uncertain times but had complete faith that the impact on rural IHC families would be identified and addressed promptly.

#### 29 April 2020

Thank you very much for your attention to this matter. We received notice today that our Educator will be underpaid by approximately \$600.00 this fortnight.

Great to hear there might be further progress in the near future.

#### 8 May 2020

We are having a very difficult time with our Service Provider at the moment and my Educator is terribly upset. We are receiving multiple emails from our provider with different notifications almost daily. Their application for additional funding has been denied. We are now being told that we could apply for the JobKeeper assistance if the Educator had an ABN prior to March. However, after reading the ICPA bulletin we thought the service would apply on the Educator's behalf, but the service is telling us our Educator needs to apply as an individual. Is this correct? We are trying to contact our provider for clarification now.

#### 6 June 2020

It has been a difficult time for everyone. We have now received the JobKeeper payment for April and May. It was quite an ordeal to get the application through as our IHC office was not as supportive as I would have hoped. The emails we received from IHC became quite tense and all Educators and families were advised to visit the ATO website and seek independent assistance. We sought our own financial advice from our Accountant and worked through the process together. A relief to have it sorted!

I am not aware of any families actively seeking new Educators at this time but know of families that have held off advertising due to concerns at the moment. It is not an ideal time to enter into IHC and I worry this event will have permanent flow-on concerns for rural IHC funding. Thanks again for checking in and for all the hard work the ICPA team does.



### **8 July 2020**

Our service provider asked for some time to try to reach a solution but at this stage have been unsuccessful.

Our Educators application for May has been denied and advised she may need to repay the April payment. No payment yet for June.

The reasoning by the ATO is that contrary to previous advice, any IHC educators registered AFTER January 1, 2020, are not eligible to receive the Job Keeper payments.

The ATO initially approved all applications however are now going through and are contacting applicants for further evidence and revoking payments based on a rule that was never made public.

This is of course becoming very distressing for our Educator and potentially causes great financial strain for our young family.

### **Case Study Two - Impacts of Relief Childcare Package on Remote In Home Care Families**

#### **12 May 2020**

After the recent media release from Minister Tehan's office about the exceptional circumstance (EC) for IHC educators I have rung both the 1300 number and our potential IHC service Capricornia IHC with no clear answers as to why they are still not registering new educators.

I have Cc'd ██████ in this email as she is in the same position as our family but with a different service provider (Wide Bay).

Both of our families have had previous educators through IHC, and our situations have not changed at all over the recent months, just the fact that one educator has left and we are wanting to register a new educator. Hours, children in care and parents work hours have not changed.

We are being told that service providers cannot register new educators even though the new educators would be eligible for EC to cover their costs and there are places available.

This is very frustrating as we are being told by the Minister that there should be no barriers to service providers taking on new registrations, but the service providers are still not doing so.

Are either of you able to help us find out why there is still a barrier to new educators being registered? If there is a problem with approval of EC or funding flowing through to service providers?

#### **12 May 2020**

Please see response from IHC below, it seems to me there is still a financial barrier for the service providers to put on new educators and from what I can gather all service providers have put a hold on new registrations so moving service providers is not an option. The financial barrier is one which has been used for weeks now.

#### **15 May 2020**

I am trying to find out why the providers (mine is not the only one) are not willing to put on educators using the EC process, when they have places available.? When I spoke to the 1300 number ██████ told me they can apply for EC as many times as they like, but the provider is saying they are limited to only applying for this 3 times. Minister Tehan's office keeps saying if there are any educators who do not qualify for





JobKeeper, they can get EC and have their invoices covered. Surely this means providers can now put on those educators promised positions before the COVID-19 changes.

We cannot apply for EC ourselves, we have to go through a service provider.

I am wanting to find out if the 3 times is a rule or if they can apply as they put on educators, as not all educators will start on the same day? Obviously there might be a bulk lot to begin with of families paying educators privately and wanting to register, then there will be families not able to put someone on till they are confirmed a place and then other families new to the system.

Also, what other barrier are preventing providers from registering educators, are EC payments being knocked back or payments taking time to come through?

I am also wanting to find out when we will return to CCS payments and the old system as this would solve all of our problems brought on by the changes.

### **21 May 2020**

I rang the IHC support agency and they just said to go back to my service provider and ask about EC. I have rung my service provider numerous times but keep getting the same answer that applying for EC is not a simple process and they can only apply 3 times and service providers are being knocked back for EC and you cannot re submit once EC has been declined. All of these answers are different to what I was told via the IHC support agency.

I have spoken to other families in the same position and they also cannot get answers from their service providers both [REDACTED] offered places to families and both are now declining to enrol educators.

It seems to me that funds are not flowing (be that JobKeeper or EC) to service providers and hence they are not willing to take on educators.

### **Case Study Three - Issues: Uncertainty, confusion, payment**

Between 12 April and 13 July, normal payments didn't exist and there was much uncertainty and confusion.

- 2 March 2020 [our IHC educator] starts at our Station
- 2 April 2020 New Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package announced
- 3 April 2020 New interim childcare package announced, 50% funding cut to IHC: "Educators will receive one normal week of pay for week ending 05.04.2020" (normal childcare subsidy) however I am unaware of what payments will look like for week ending 12.04.2020 (new temporary funding) and thereafter.
- 6 April 2020 Notified that government will use a 'reference fortnight' of 17 Feb – 1 March to calculate IHC payments. [Our IHC educator] started on 2 March ...
- 28 April 2020 IHC Provider does not have sufficient funds to pay educators in full
- 1 May 2020 Anyone with an ABN prior to 12 March 2020 eligible for JobKeeper
- 6 May 2020 IHC Provider expects educators to be paid 20% of normal income
- 8 May 2020 IHC Provider not eligible for extra funding



- 26 June 2020 ATO - Educator told not eligible for JobKeeper but told don't have to repay amounts already paid
- 29 June 2020 ATO - confirmed not eligible for JobKeeper
- 29 June 2020 IHC Provider confirmed anyone who registered with IHC after 1 Jan 2020 not eligible for JobKeeper "The ATO initially approved all applications however are now going through and are contacting applicants for further evidence and revoking payments based on a rule that was never made public."
- 13 July 2020 Normal childcare subsidy resumed
- 15 July 2020 Expect unlikely that JobKeeper payments will have to be repaid.
- 6 Aug 2020 IHC Provider able to back pay for all educators who had JobKeeper eligibility revoked.



## APPENDIX C – TRAINING CASE STUDY

### Case Study

Our son is [REDACTED] and commenced an apprenticeship in January 2020. He relocated to his place of employment, 500 km from his family property. He moved into a rental property, which was obviously costly and included purchasing white goods, furniture and general basic household appliances/utensils etc. On top of this was two weeks rent in advance and a bond. My son's weekly expenses include rent, electricity, food, fuel and general expenses that are necessary to live and take care of himself.

Our son didn't qualify for Dependent Youth Allowance due to the parental income test and the fact our company structure includes a family trust. My husband and myself supplement his living costs where we can to assist with his expenses and he also has a very stringent budget! He also does a lot of overtime when the opportunity is available to increase his wage per week, which, as a first-year apprentice wage is very low.

We were successful in obtaining the Living Away from Home Allowance, which is a federal rent assistance payment for apprentices and trainees who live remote and must move away from home to access their apprenticeship or traineeship.

When COVID-19 hit, our son's hours were cut back from 38 to 30 as the company he works for split the shifts, so they had two teams of mechanics to reduce the risk of infection. Our son therefore couldn't do any overtime because the workshop had to be cleaned in between shifts. Therefore his [REDACTED] gross wage for 38 hours per week dropped to a gross of [REDACTED] per day for a 6-hour day.

Because his employer (a large trucking company) is classified as an essential service, and trucks are still moving, they didn't qualify for the Job Keeper payment given their income hadn't dropped by the specified amount.

As our son does not receive Youth Allowance, he was not eligible for the Coronavirus Supplement, even though he IS eligible for the LAFHA, which is a recognition that he has to move away from home to access his apprenticeship.

He was therefore receiving no income assistance and was forced to survive on an extremely low wage for months. As parents, we did all we could to subsidise his living expenses, however, it seems wrong that this becomes the responsibility of the parent to ensure our son could afford to live away from home and continue his apprenticeship during this pandemic.

Our son very nearly did not continue with his apprenticeship because of the lack of financial assistance. He simply couldn't afford to live in [REDACTED] on [REDACTED] per day with rent, food, fuel, electricity and everything that comes with living away from home, and if we as parents weren't able to carry him through, he would have quit. Comparatively, the other first and second year apprentices at his workplace had the option to move home with their parents to save on costs during this time of reduced working hours.