JULIE McCROSSIN: Ladies and gentlemen, I might ask Wayne - if you want to take your seats - we're just going to watch a film about the isolated children's program. If you're not here to watch it, I wouldn't mind you going outside and - Wayne, would you like to play it? Thank you...

(VIDEO)

>> Australia is a big, beautiful and unique country, home to some of the most geographically isolated communities in the world. For many of the families living in these remote regions, their only access to schooling is to study by distance education.

>> Cattle Station 150km from Cloncurry in the north-west of Queensland - they're one of around 1,500 Australian families who rely on distance education and, like in most cases, mum Tara has taken on the responsibility of home-tutoring her kids.

>> Give us the lowdown - how are your kids schooled by distance education, and what are the logistics involved?

>> They dial in at 8:00am. They have morning notices. They have a run around before school starts, get the wiggles out. The school plays the national anthem over the phone, so the children know when they hear that it's time for school. Once we start, we have our - a very strict routine.

>> How many blocks do we have altogether?

>> Once school starts at 8:00, I'm in the schoolroom to 3:30. Once the schoolchildren have finished for the day, I do an extra 1-2 hours every afternoon prepping for the next day, so my next day runs smoothly. Then I need to go and get dinner sorted and food organised and Jessica bathed, kids bathed, into bed. Then if I have more to do, I'll go in after dinner. It's a mammoth investment in technology. We have two desktops, a laptop, webcams, printer/scanner, modems - you name it. We probably have more technology than most schools, really. And that's the tyranny of distance - that's how the children connect with their teacher and their classmates. It can be very hard finding that balance between mother and teacher. And sometimes, that line gets very blurred. Sometimes I forget to turn off as a teacher. Sometimes they forget to turn off as students. It's probably the biggest challenge you have to face - teaching your own children - and keeping and maintaining that respect. It doesn't come naturally. It's something you have to work at. It's huge. It's a huge commitment that is undertaken by home tutors - not just by me, but home tutors across the country, teaching their kids through distance education.

>> Good morning, you two. How are you this morning, Emma?

>> Good morning, Mrs Pollard.

>> Morning, morning, morning.

>> Emma, could you please hold up your booklet? Have a look at your camera - we have the lovely Emma modelling English Activity Booklet today - that's the one you're looking for...

>> They attend Mount Isa School of the Air. Tim Moes has been school of the principal for more than 10 years.

>> Give us an idea of what a day in the life of the principal of a distance education school is like.

>> It's fairly busy. We have eight studios, busy from 8:00 in the morning through 3:00 in the afternoon. Kids are only on air for an hour a day, and teachers are on air for two hours a day. But the rest of the time, teachers do individual lessons with their kids. If they've got 14 children, they might do 14 half-hour reading lessons over the course of a week. They have individual personal-learning times with each student, so there's another 14.5 hours of that. So teachers spend here an inordinate amount of time on the telephone - more than telemarketers, I'm sure. That's the only way we can get to the kids and educate them. In the months prior to that lesson, we send out all the hard materials through the mail - so kids have all their books, their resources - anything that they need for the year, they've got. And then, through our lessons, we travel with the kids and the materials they have in their hand. The vast majority of the education still falls with the family and the parents. It's a mutual responsibility, teaching their kids. Without the parents and the family taking responsibility, distance education could never work.

>> Does it get to a stage where you feel you can't educate your kids to the level they need?

>> Once the children get to high school, it's generally expected that the children need to go to a standard schooling curriculum. So most families send their children to boarding school.

>> There are challenges to this way of life when educating your kids, but what do you think are the advantages?

>> The advantages are huge. They get to ride their horses. They get to do their animals. They get to play outside every day without fear of anything much, really. It's a wonderful way of life.

>> I think what city parents miss out on is just knowing exactly what their kids are doing every minute of the day. Like, our families know exactly what they've been taught, what curriculum they've been through. At the end of teaching for 7-10 years - which is the typical length - many of our mums could take 2-3 years off a university course, I'm sure.

>> What you've created here is really special. What makes you so proud about all this?

>> Well, I often say to new staff coming - "If you think we're a school that just enrols students, we're not. We're actually a school of families." When we enrol a child, we enrol the mum as the governess, the gadgets involved, and it's that whole relationship, I guess, of Mount Isa School of the Air community that's really special to me. I guess it's that sense of family that we create. And it's quite remarkable, isn't it, that our greatest disadvantage is distance, but it's also our greatest advantage, in that it does bring us together.

>> The Haykins from Roxby Downs share a boundary with the Lochs. A governess tutors the children while Annie and her husband worked the land.

>> Why did your family decide to have a governess rather than you stay at home and educate the kids yourself?

>> To begin with, I did teach the children when they were little, in Prep and Year 1. As they got older, their needs changed. I found the new curriculum rollout very hard to keep up with, and I didn't feel like I was giving the kids the best shot, the best education. So I went out of my way to try and find someone with either a teaching degree, teaching experience, someone that was educated in the language of the new curriculum, which is in the learning guides now. We basically gave up one wage - so I've moved into the schooling to teach the kids, and Dean now handles things out here. If he needs some help out on the property, then we have to pay someone to come in to help him to do that. He can't just rely on me to be able to do it.

>> Judy Sinclair-Newton is a representative from the Isolated Children's Parents' Association. The ICPA is the voice of the mums and the dads living and working, raising their kids in the bush.

>> Australia's been a world leader in the delivery of distance education but, over the years, that has changed significantly to the way it's been delivered. It is increasing the pressure on families, and that is something that hasn't been addressed - the role that the tutor plays in the classroom. Without them, there is no distance education program. We've been looking to have a financial recognition - the recognition that that's often the mum is taken out of the workforce, often for many years - it's a huge commitment, and something they take on with a great sense of pride.

>> These families need the support. They need some financial recognition of the role they are playing in the classroom. We need the skills, the knowledge, that these families bring to the bush.

>> We want to bring our kids up here. We think it's beneficial. We think that they can have a great education here. We just need the means to do it.

>> I wouldn't want to live in the city because I feel so lucky being able to live out here and in my school here as well. If I didn't have, um, a home tutor, I wouldn't be able to have proper education or do anything that a normal kid would. Education is really important to me because, if you didn't have that, then you wouldn't have the best future you possibly could.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Ladies and gentlemen, a round of applause for yourselves, because so many came in to watch it, which is fantastic!

(APPLAUSE)