

President's Report Federal Conference 2019

Federal Life Members Mrs. Julia Materne, Mrs. Jane Gloster and Mrs. Roxanne Morissey, fellow ICPA members and guests, it's my pleasure to update you on the work of your ICPA Federal Council with my final report as your Federal President.

2019 saw a very tough start for many of our rural and remote families with the continuation of this relentless drought and ironically, the rain event bringing devastation for some areas of northern Queensland. Federal Council's thoughts have been with all of our ICPA families as they struggle through these challenges and we continue to stand together with our State Councils and Branches to try to help families in any way we can in these difficult times. We appreciate those of you who have been able to attend our Conference and dedicate some of your time and energy to ICPA despite the challenges at home. In the lead up to the recent Federal Election, Federal Council worked extensively to get our ICPA message out as far and wide as we could.

We had quite a bit of interest from media around rural education issues during the election and we were given several opportunities to comment on ICPA's "wish list" for the election. While we weren't able to achieve any specific commitments in the campaign promises, a number of positive steps were initiated prior to the election announcement and with the Federal Election now over, Federal Council is busy taking things up from where things left off and also building relationships with those newly elected to Parliament.

The drought and monsoon event have also held media focus and this has given ICPA an inroad to raise the issue of the necessity for the establishment of a Rural Hardship Education Fund. Never has the need for this fund been so obviously acute. ICPA's proposal is that a Rural Hardship Education Fund must be put permanently in place to assist rural families with essential costs of education. This message is being raised at every opportunity in Canberra as well as with other organisations who support this call.

At the end of last year, ICPA met and consulted with UNICEF to discuss the impact that the long term drought is having on children in rural areas. UNICEF Australia released a Drought Report on 18 February, 2019 which put the spotlight on the effect of drought on children's wellbeing, as well as the impact on their education.

ICPA has concerns for the mental wellbeing of our rural and remote children when facing these types of situations continuously and we have been advocating for the creation of mental health resources specific to rural and remote students and the unique challenges they face because of where they live.

Conference 2018

After the 2018 Federal Conference, Council set to work actioning the 89 motions that were carried. In October we had our face-to-face meeting in Canberra and embarked on a delegation to Parliament House where we took those motions to 35 separate meetings with politicians. We always tell new councillors to wear comfortable shoes in Parliament House, and I think they found out we weren't joking. Style goes out the window when you only have one day and a lot of kilometres to cover. We actually tracked our distance that day and most of our delegation groups did over 8k walking (and sometimes running) through the halls of Parliament House to get to all of the meetings, with one group just nudging over the 10k mark (you can probably guess whose group that was).

Meetings with the Departments of Education, Human Services and Social Services followed the next day. These meetings are always beneficial because the Department personnel we meet with are in positions to make changes to the process for Youth Allowance applications or AIC for example, or to take direct feedback on the ability (or inability) of rural/remote families to access In Home Care.

Submissions

Submissions continue to be one of the preferred methods for the government to receive comment and Federal Council started this year with a bang, lodging four submissions in January alone; adding to a total of 13 submissions being lodged in the last 12 months.

ICPA representatives have also made appearances at many public hearings all over the nation and further information has been sought from panels on several occasions; a true indication we are being heard. Last year, Professor John Halsey commented when he was conducting the Independent Review into Regional Rural and Remote Education that wherever there was a public hearing, there was ICPA and some of the other Inquiries have had a similar experience this year.

Meetings

Federal ICPA is on a number of committees, advisory groups and coalitions and works closely with many organisations with whom we share interest. Some of these include ACARA, the Rural Regional and Remote Communications Coalition, the National Rural Health Alliance, nbn Roundtable, the Outback Alliance and the Virtual Work Experience Program Advisory Group.

This year the Joint Councils meeting of ICPA state and federal representatives was held during February in Melbourne. Federal Council continues to work closely with states on many issues and appreciates the efforts of state representatives in getting to the meeting and contributing so freely. This meeting helps to improve consistency across our messages and assists us with working as a unified organisation.

Touching quickly on some of the focus areas Federal Council has been working on-

Boarding Away from Home for Schooling

Federal Council continues to raise the need for a significant increase to the Assistance for Isolated Children Allowance (AIC). With the severe drought continuing in many areas of Australia, (and now the additional challenge of a flood event for some) the ever-widening gap between the AIC and the cost to families for boarding is even more pronounced. ICPA requests that the Federal Government undertake a review of AIC, and Federal Council raised this at our delegations in October.

We have also spoken extensively on the need for a permanent program to be in place to help rural and remote families with education costs in times of rural hardship, whether this is through fire, flood, cyclone, industry impacts or drought. In my role as Federal President, I have been attending meetings with the Joint Agency Drought Taskforce and raising the urgent need for the implementation of a Rural Hardship Education Fund (RHEF) as well as highlighting the excessive educational costs faced by our rural families in accessing schooling for their children.

It can often be difficult to talk about our situations, especially when things are tough, but if there are families willing to share their stories about the difficulties they are facing in trying to pay for school fees or educate their children, it really helps us get the message across to the people we speak with in government. Our Councils are here to listen and help where we can. Your stories and the real life that you and your children live are very powerful messages. The people we talk with remember the stories, and because of those stories, they remember our families. Federal Council are always appreciate receiving your examples and you are welcome to phone or email us.

Mental wellbeing, particularly for students who live away from home for schooling, has also been a focus in our boarding discussions and Federal Council has been involved in several conversations with various organisations interested in the creation of resources designed specifically for rural and remote students and their families which will help address the unique challenges they face whether they are boarding away from home, in a small rural school setting or distance education classroom.

Communications

Kristen Coggan will elaborate on communications in her report. However, we continue to work with Telstra and nbn™ to resolve issues affecting our members and we welcome members' feedback and contact when there's a problem.

We were excited to be part of the nbn™ Sky Muster Plus announcement. Hopefully these new plans will assist students who have been unable to access an education port, including tertiary students and those at small rural schools.

We continue to advocate with stakeholders for mobile expansion into areas with a rural school, receiving support from government and Telstra. Telstra has also unmetered a number of sites used for education.

With regards to the Universal Service Obligation which is moving to the Universal Service Guarantee, Federal Council was reassured once again during our delegations at the end of October that landlines will remain in place for rural and remote customers until a more appropriate, reliable and affordable service was available to meet their needs.

Early Childhood Education and Care

The last year has been very busy in the area of Early Childhood Education and Care. Federal Councillor, Jane Morton has attended consultations and provided significant feedback around the new In Home Care program that replaced the previous In Home Care and the Nanny Pilot Program from 2 July 2018. Jane will be talking more about the new program and its guidelines in her Early Childhood Education Care Report.

Rural Schools and School Travel

Di Skene will be presenting her update on travel later in the conference, but I would like to mention that shortly after last year's Federal Conference, Greyhound Australia announced that it would no longer carry children under the age of 15 without a chaperone. Greyhound cited safety of children at stops, especially rural destinations, as their reason for the change. The decision by Greyhound, taken without any consultation, impacted about 250 boarding students from rural areas nationally.

The Senate Inquiry into the Regional Air Travel Report was handed down in June. ICPA (Aust) and several state councils put submissions into this enquiry and attended public hearings. Ideally, we would like to see outcomes such as student concessional fares, or travel allowances for rural and remote students included in the AIC. Federal Council has recently had encouraging conversation with QANTAS and we have been able to offer feedback on their Regional Residents fares.

Specific Education Needs

At the last federal conference two motions asked for rural, regional and remote families to access travel and accommodation assistance to attend appointments with qualified professionals in order to diagnose and manage specific learning needs. This is an ongoing issue and ideas of how to further this appeal are encouraged. These children fall into a large crack between education and health systems in regional areas across all states and territories. Federal Council recently placed a submission into the Medicare Benefits Schedule Taskforce Review to add further comment on this issue.

Tertiary/Training

In the area of Tertiary and Training, rural and remote students have had another win. As of January 1, 2019, the parental income cut-off for regional, rural and remote students applying for Youth Allowance under the *Independent through work students* criteria, increased from \$150 000 to \$160 000, plus \$10 000 for each

eligible additional child in the family. There is also greater flexibility in the choice of financial year used for parental income. Kate Thompson will provide some further information on the happenings in Tertiary and training in her report but it's good to see some runs on the board there.

The ways in which ICPA gets information and our messages out to members has evolved quite a bit over the past few years. Federal Council thanks our Publicity Officer over the past four years, Nikki Macqueen, for exploring many different avenues to keep ICPA out there in the media and information flowing to members via the latest modes of communication. She's done a tremendous job and her passion and enthusiasm is empowering. We may sometimes doubt that we can tackle certain tasks or interviews, but Nikki always reminds us that yes, we can. Thank you Nikki.

ICPA is an incredibly supportive organisation. As my time as your Federal President closes, I would like to thank all of our members, branches and councils for being so tremendously supportive. One of the things that I have enjoyed the most in my role has been the opportunity to meet with so many members from across the country, learn about where they live, and hear about their children and their schooling. I have also really enjoyed working so closely with our councils, you are all amazing, dedicated people and so many great things are being achieved.

When the suggestion came up four years ago that perhaps I should nominate for the President's role, I had some doubts. In fact, I had a lot of doubts. Like many new President's I wasn't sure I had the experience or skill to do the job. A very wise mum from up our way (a mum who had taught 4 children in her Distance Ed classroom and was a long-time ICPA member) said to me, "As long as you remember where you are from, who you represent, stick to what you know; speak from that, and you will do fine." This didn't just help me through my time, but I think it is also part of why ICPA has always been so effective over its 48 years-

We speak from the heart

We get our facts straight

And we remember who we are and where we come from.

As members from diverse areas, different situations and varying ways of educating our children, we must stand together as we face the same challenges; speak from our hearts and do the best we can to try to bring about better access to education for geographically isolated students. Keep up the great work and as I step down as President, I know that ICPA will be in good hands.

In closing, as we begin our discussions on the education needs of our rural and remote children, I'd like you to consider this quote from Marian Wright Edelman "The question is not if we can afford to invest in every child; it is whether we can afford not to."

We ask that you help us to "Sustain our Future and Invest in Our Children"

Thank you.
Wendy Hick