

DISTANCE EDUCATION REPORT

Jo Murphy

“That ICPA (Aust) continues to lobby the Federal Government to establish a Distance Education Teaching Allowance (DETA) in recognition of the role the home tutor undertakes when educating students via distance education.”

This motion has come from branches across Australia for many years, and has gained momentum as we have been able to meet and communicate more effectively as a group. Acknowledgement of the value of the time that a Distance Education Tutor contributes to educating the children of the isolated areas of Australia is required, and our lobby this year has been devoted to this.

No recognition or recompense is currently given to the energy devoted to delivery of the Australian Curriculum by the Distance Education Tutor. Distance education is now vastly more complex and time consuming than it was not all that long ago. As teaching distance education has become more onerous, complicated and time consuming, the pressure placed on this role has grown phenomenally. Distance education used to be pretty straightforward. Papers were sent, filled in and returned to the teacher for marking. Now it is the computer, the software, the internet, the Wi-Fi, the satellite, the terminology, the acronyms, the forms, and the lack of internet access – need I continue?

ICPA aims for the DETA to be linked to the AIC(Assistance for Isolated Children), and the original amount requested has been based on the concept of the Carer’s Allowance. The Carer’s Allowance is provided on the basis that there is someone available to provide additional care for a person who is unable to do so, in either their own home or that of the person being cared for. Federal Council will be reviewing this again as part of our distance education action plan and lobby.

It is envisaged that if schools tick the box to say that the student is eligible for AIC then the distance education tutor should be recognised with the DETA. Our government currently recognises the need to support us with childcare, but only up to school age, and then we are left with this mammoth task of their education, without any recognition or recompense at all.

There has been a change in the mindset of people in the bush. We travel more, we are more connected and we are seeing other opportunities, as well as new ideas in our neighbouring states and even internationally. This increasing exposure has encouraged the push for recognition of our role. The less “stoic” nature of women in the isolated areas of Australia sees us using all of our resources to get equity of access to education, rather than admitting that’s the way things are and we’ll put up with it.

2013/14 has seen the portfolio updating our promotional material and thanks to Ainsley McArthur for her ‘classroom of 5’ photo now used for the DETA lobby. A copy of this has been sent to State Councils for use in their own lobby. We have also produced financial year calendars for the politicians we saw in Canberra and a PowerPoint which we hope will lead

soon to a video. We have written to Ministers following up last year's motions, with only acknowledgement not success or, seemingly, even much understanding.

Council has also been sourcing an ambassador for our lobby who will speak for us as necessary. This is about valuing the time and recognising the enormous contribution the distance education tutor makes to educate the isolated children of Australia.

Our delegation to Canberra was provided with a warm reception, and they sympathised with our plight; however, all were very non-committal and unable to provide any assistance at this stage due to budget constraints and tightening of policies. We met Minister Pyne's advisor, Scott Prasser and Sussan Ley, the Assistant Education Minister.

The DE portfolios have reinvigorated federal/state connections and have had a few tele meetings to share information on distance education matters and to provide updates on what Federal Council are working towards. Queensland's Kim Hughes has organised these meetings and this has opened communication channels so if something exciting, innovative or even invigorating comes up, we can share it! We have been able to share the frustrations of our own state and federal issues and appreciate the positives, when hearing of someone else's negatives around the nation.

Around the country, different states have always faced a variety of hurdles when accessing distance education but one common thread currently runs through this fight. This is of course the issue of internet access. As one of our members said "To deliver education from remote areas we are heavily reliant on the internet for access to emails, delivery of lessons and education materials. This inability to access reliable and fast internet speeds causes frustration to distance education families due to the disruption that occurs in the home classroom resulting in challenges to complete lessons."

"The Abbott Government is taking action to ensure Indigenous and disadvantaged communities have access to high quality child care, regardless of where they live."¹ Let us hope they can see the need to take action on ensuring our children have access to high quality education, supported by a DE tutor, regardless of where they live.

Whilst the name of our intended allowance has changed over the many years ICPA has been lobbying for it, the intent certainly has not. This has always been, and remains today, the need to recognise and compensate families who must provide daily educational supervision and support for their children who are studying via distance education. Federal Council continues to work on the 'drip on a stone' theory in the hope that one day soon a brave and compassionate government will take the plunge.

¹ Hon Susan Ley, Assistant Minister for Education - Media release 12 June 2014.