

## **RURAL SCHOOLS AND TRAVEL REPORT**

**Di Skene**

I feel very fortunate to be able to deliver you this report for the first time as leader of the Rural Schools and Travel Portfolio here in Canberra for 2018. It has been a productive year for advocating Rural Schools and Travel which has seen Federal Council submit many submissions, send letters and have a great many discussions with regards to current and previous motions. The 2017 motion updates can be viewed from the following link on the ICPA website:

<https://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1124/federal-conference-motion-updates/federal-conference-motion-update-2017.pdf>

### **RURAL SCHOOLS**

Remote and isolated locations in Australia provide the greatest challenges for improving provision of education options and pathways for children and families. The financial cost to families educating children in rural and remote locations continues to rise and can be attributed to many leaving these areas. An increasing number of rural and remote families are separating, with the mother and children relocating to larger cities and towns during the years of schooling. A drastic measure such as this by families to reduce educational expenses, negatively impacts the family unit, small communities and rural schools.

While all Australian governments recognise the social and economic benefits of a high quality and equitable school education system, ICPA (Aust) continues to devote an enormous amount of volunteer hours holding relevant governments to account to address inequities.

Recommendations highlighting the need to focus on inequities in the educational outcomes of rural students which report them to be at least one and a half years behind their metropolitan peers can be found in documents dating back many years. They mention the endemic problems facing rural and remote education, including significant studies providing guidance and direction to those formulating policy. Despite this, very little action has followed to ensure improvement in educational outcomes for all students in rural and remote Australia. Consequently, Federal Council was thrilled when government called for the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE), led by Emeritus Professor Halsey.

Federal Council met with Professor Halsey during the 2017 conference in Alice Springs, attended many forums around Australia and lodged a comprehensive submission which can be viewed on the ICPA website or the link below. However, the following report details what opportunities that could assist rural and remote students to be able to access high quality education, addressing low enrolments and access pathways for students without separating families, moving from small communities to improved access whilst also being affordable.

<https://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1130/federal-submissions-1/irre-final-report.pdf>

The Australian Government response into the IRRRRE saw regional, rural and remote areas at the forefront of the following outcomes: <https://www.education.gov.au/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education>

*The Australian Government recognises that it generally costs more to educate students going to school in regional, rural and remote areas than it does for students in city-based schools. That is why the Quality Schools package increases Commonwealth funding for those students from \$3.9 billion in 2017*

*to \$6.8 billion in 2027 - an increase of 74.6 per cent. This will mean per student funding for students in these areas will grow by 4.9 per cent per year over that period.*

With the above excerpt from Federal Government and the IRRRRE, Professor Halsey's eleven recommendations have been accepted and with hope this review will see improved outcomes for regional Australia once implemented.

### **TRAVEL**

Currently there are inequities in Student Travel Allowances offered by the Commonwealth. Whilst Federal Government has in place Fares Allowances to assist with student travel under the ABSTUDY and Youth Allowance Schemes, there is no provision for travel in the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme which is the assistance a large number of geographically isolated children fall under.

### **AIR TRAVEL**

Numerous letters, emails and telephone conversations with airlines have taken place over the year in order to action travel motions through Federal Council. Members are also benefitting from the efforts of our State Councils, who are also working with airlines to make travel between home and boarding school more affordable.

Congratulations to Northern Territory ICPA who in recent times have successfully met with some of the major airlines and been able to sit around the same table to discuss travel. Let us hope their discussion opens many more doors. Currently, Federal Council are pleased that QANTAS has two state trials in place for the public with one in Queensland and the other in Western Australia that offer a 30% variable discount. Rex Airlines have the 'Bush to Boarding' scheme available in North Queensland between any Gulf port and Cairns and Brisbane to Mt Isa via Toowoomba, Charleville, Quilpie, Windorah, Birdsville, Bedourie and Boulia in western Queensland. Local residential fares in regions such as Charleville and Longreach in Qld where local government has worked with state government and airlines to offer residents reduced fares. Patient Assisted Travel Schemes (PATS) in WA, SA, NT and Qld and similarly named schemes in NSW and Tasmania provide financial assistance with travel and accommodation where rural and remote patients need to seek medical specialists. Although this does not include specific needs consultations with allied health professionals, Federal Council recognise that these schemes are being utilised by our members where possible but need a much wider concessional scheme to include all geographically isolated boarding children from all over Australia to ease the monetary pressures that compulsory education has on families.

Queensland Senator Barry O'Sullivan, as Chair of the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee, instigated an inquiry into the operation, regulation and funding of air route service delivery to rural, regional and remote communities in the final months of 2017. Federal Council provided a submission and was fortunate to receive an invitation to address this panel, allowing the opportunity to express the social and economic impacts that lack of supply, dependability and costs involved in living in rural and remote areas has on many families. The implications this has for travelling to and from boarding school include, access to medical assistance, travel for rural/remote school students for camps and learning activities, inequities in Commonwealth student travel allowances is just a broad overview. The full submission can be viewed on the ICPA website: <https://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1118/federal-submissions-1/regional-air-fare-inquiry-submission-feb-2018.pdf>

Recently, Senator O'Sullivan indicated that 'ongoing concerns regarding the impact of high airfare prices on bush families was a major factor in his decision to initiate this inquiry'. He went on to say 'while he cannot anticipate the outcomes of the final report as there are still public hearings planned

in the future, the contributions from groups such as ICPA would play a significant role in the final recommendations’.

## **ROADS**

Many families in rural and remote areas travel large distances on roads that are in disrepair. Motions carried last year raised concerns for many who must travel on such roads to access educational opportunities (some of which are compulsory). As some roads in rural and remote Australia are funded by the Commonwealth, Federal Council have voiced concerns regarding the deterioration and appalling conditions that remote residents face daily to be able to access education, schools, boarding, health appointments and general everyday travel needs. This issue was highlighted in the ICPA (Aust) submission to the Economics References Committee Inquiry into Regional Inequality in Australia in April of this year. ICPA sought urgent commitment from the Australian Government to a long-term maintenance strategy with adequate funding to bring national roads back to all weather and safe trafficable surface. Federal Council welcomed the Turnbull Government’s 2018 Budget which brought about a promise of \$3.5 billion dollars to upgrade regional roads which is very encouraging for our members and their future road safety.

Regional airfares should be affordable and services adequate, consistent and reliable to better assist regional residents and strengthen regional communities. Air and road travel are essential modes of travel for rural and remote living as long distances are not avoidable and most times difficult with current challenges for families and Federal Council continues to lobby for these services.