

BOARDING SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL TERM HOSTELS REPORT

Nikki Macqueen

The last twelve months has been a very busy and productive time within the Boarding Schools portfolio. Over the past year there has been an enormous amount of media regarding access to an equitable education for rural and remote students. ICPA (Aust) has welcomed the attention and would like to thank our members who give themselves freely for an interview when contacted. Federal Council has been determined to get our message out there. From major newspapers such as The Australian, to high profile television programs such as Landline, as well as the many regional radio stations that have sourced information and interviews from ICPA, we have tried to raise the awareness of the challenges faced by geographically isolated children when accessing the compulsory schooling years. We look forward to continuing the relationship with all who help spread the word and raise the profile of outback education.

Increasing AIC Boarding Allowance

After many years of writing letters and attending meetings with Departments and Politicians, it was decided that a major campaign would be launched to raise awareness of the concerns and issues surrounding the discrepancy between the Assistance for Isolated Children Boarding Allowance available and the ever increasing cost of boarding school education. At the beginning of this school year and following countless hours of consultation, the Boarding School Survey was designed and the results were an outstanding success with the Boarding School Access Research Document, revealed in April.

The survey was distributed to our 2 500 member families as well as through our social media. Federal Council was thrilled to receive 1 034 responses and over 500 comments. I would like to thank everyone who took the time to participate. There were some surprising results and many comments highlighted the impact the issue of educating students from rural and remote Australia is having both financially and emotionally on families and the need for urgent action was obvious. If anyone has not yet read the document I urge you to go to the ICPA website, www.icpa.com.au, download and read the many heartfelt stories and compelling data that supports our campaign.

The research document was launched during a delegation in Canberra. President Wendy Hick, Immediate Past President Judy Sinclair-Newton, Vice President Kate Thompson, Councillor Lynise Conaghan and myself spent a very full day in the offices of Parliament House lobbying for:

- An immediate increase to the AIC Basic Boarding component of \$4 000.
- A substantial increase to the Additional Boarding component for those families having shown financial need.
- The annual increase to be aligned with the education sub-index of the Consumer Price Index (CPI).

At the time of writing my report, Federal Council was thrilled to hear the announcement by Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce at the National Press Club on June 22, 2016 that the Coalition will commit to increase the Assistance for Isolated Children's (AIC) Additional Boarding Allowance by 50% to provide support to low-income families whose geographically isolated child boards away from their family home. Federal Council have also called on other parties to match this commitment.

AIC Applications

Following on from motions being presented at Federal Conferences, ICPA has contacted the Department of Human Services (DHS) regarding online applications for AIC. This online process is currently being developed and an announcement is set to be forthcoming, although no timeframe was promised. We thank personnel within DHS for their assistance whenever a query from ICPA is made. The dedicated AIC hotline (132318) is an asset to all who need fast, reliable information regarding Assistance for Isolated

Children. A mention must go to Mr Guy Mathews, National AIC Program Manager, for his assistance and support in providing information and answering questions. We thank Guy for once again attending Federal Conference and also making himself available for the “Great Ideas Workshop”.

Rural Hardship Education Fund

Members are aware of the extenuating drought conditions that are crippling many areas of Australia. ICPA is calling on the Federal Government to urgently introduce a Rural Hardship Education Fund to address the grave concerns of many families in drought stricken areas who simply cannot afford to educate their children. Some form of emergency measure needs to be put into place to urgently assist these families in meeting the cost of educating their children so that these children can continue their compulsory studies during times of hardship and recovery. Assistance is required in times of adversity for education as there are government drought subsidies and assistance available for freight on stock feed/water and some day to day living expenses but nothing for education.

Drought is adding to the burden of education costs leading to: families removing their children from boarding schools, families splitting and moving to town in order to access schooling or in some cases choosing between siblings as they cannot afford to keep all their children in boarding school and mental health implications of parents and students, firstly affected by drought and compounded by not being able to provide for their children. No Australian family should have to be making these heart-wrenching decisions about access to compulsory schooling. This fund would ensure educational continuity when the huge out-of-pocket costs associated with boarding children away from home cannot be met during times of drought and drought recovery, when families experience years of little to no income. A precedence was set in 2005 and between 2008-2011 when the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) allowance was increased and a supplementary payment was paid to the Additional Boarding Allowance but no educational assistance has been forthcoming from the federal government in this current drought.

Fringe Benefit Tax

In an effort that encourages the attraction and retention of staff in rural and remote locations, some employers offer their staff a financial contribution towards educational expenses. However, these payments incur a Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) which negatively impacts the intent of the contribution. The removal of FBT on the financial contributions of employers to employees in geographically isolated locations for education expenses such as boarding school fees, is an initiative that will potentially encourage families to stay in the bush and inspire employers to contribute towards the increasingly high costs of boarding school. It is also an initiative that may encourage employers to more actively employ families. Families employed on properties are often lost to the bush when their children commence boarding school.

Letters have been written to relevant government representatives and this issue continues to be raised during delegations. Support from AgForce is also acknowledged. AgForce has submitted correspondence in support of FBT removal on employee contributions to education expenses and included case studies to demonstrate the impact of the FBT upon families struggling to access an affordable education.

Federal Council continues to seek recognition from government that any tax on day to day living and employment expenses will have an impact on the cost of education for isolated students when applied to boarding schools whenever an opportunity arises.

ICPA (Aust) continues to work closely with many organisations in an attempt to strengthen the advocacy for an equitable education for our students. We have been asked to speak at the upcoming Australian

Boarding Schools Association (ABSA) conference on the challenges facing our members. This is a fantastic opportunity for our organisation and yet another chance to ensure our concerns are being heard by the wider community. Other organisations that the Boarding School Portfolio have worked with this year include the Country Women's Association of Australia (CWAA), AgForce, Boarding Australia, National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA), National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC), Australian Women in Agriculture (AWIA) and National Farmer's Federation (NFF). We work closely with State Councils in particular those on the boarding and allowance portfolios. There is an open line of communication between us all and this has certainly assisted with each states' individual lobbies. We are indeed honoured to have the author of *The Boarder Parent's Handbook* Dr Kate Hadwen, here at our conference as a guest speaker. ICPA (Aust) former President, Roxanne Morrissey was one of the consultants of this book and 100% of the proceeds from its sales are directed back to our organisation. An invaluable tool for both newcomers and old hats at being a boarder parent and to have Dr Hadwen present and available for this conference is truly valuable.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my fellow Boarding School Portfolio Councillors Kate Thompson, Kate Gray, Lynise Conaghan, Wendy Hick and Judy Sinclair-Newton for their instrumental support and guidance over this past year. Due to my involvement with the Publicity Officer role I have decided to step down as the leader of the Boarding Schools Portfolio. Throughout this last year we have all done an enormous amount of work towards an increase in the AIC and I can't thank these ladies enough for being there whenever they were needed.