

## **BOARDING SCHOOLS/ SCHOOL TERM HOSTELS PORTFOLIO REPORT**

**Caroline Robinson**

ICPA (Aust) continues to advocate and support members whose children must attend boarding school in order to access their compulsory education as they live too far away from a school to be able to attend daily. For many families who live in rural communities as well as on rural properties, boarding is the only practical option for their children's secondary education.

**2018 Federal Conference** Following the "Country Kids in Capitals" 2018 Federal Conference in Canberra, ICPA (Aust) wrote letters pertaining to Boarding School motions to the Prime Minister of Australia, Minister for Human Services and Minister for Families and Social Services with copies to the Minister for Education, Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources as well as shadow Ministers and Greens representatives outlining the concerns raised in the 2018 boarding schools/school term hostels motions. In response to our letters we received several replies, including from the Prime Minister the Hon Scott Morrison MP acknowledging our request for the establishment of a Rural Hardship Education Fund and another from the Assistant Treasurer with regards to the complexities and difficulties associated with Fringe Benefit Tax issues.

**Rural Hardship Education Fund** Federal Council have spoken extensively on the need for a permanent program to assist rural and remote families with education costs in times of rural hardship, whether this is through fire, flood, industry impacts or drought.

ICPA (Aust) received a reply from The Hon Scott Morrison MP in response to the request for the establishment of a Rural Hardship Education Fund, outlining the outcomes from the National Drought Summit held on the 26 October 2018 and stating:

'As a Federal Government, it's our job to look after the families, individuals and communities to ensure that there is food on the table, kids can keep going to school and that the towns and regions can remain viable.'

ICPA (Aust) has also had representation at meetings with the Joint Agencies Drought Taskforce where we raised the urgent need for the implementation of a Rural Hardship Education Fund (RHEF) as well as highlighting the excessive educational costs faced by rural families in accessing schooling for their children.

Federal Council is gathering current case studies regarding flood and drought impacted families as they struggle to keep their children at boarding school. These provide credible insights to support our advocacy.

Following the catastrophic monsoon event in North Queensland the Federal Government via the Department of Human Services announced in March 2019 the *Flood Education Supplement* which provided a one-time payment of \$1,000 to eligible students as part of the North Queensland Flood Recovery Package. Families who are eligible to receive Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) or ABSTUDY living in flood affected Queensland shires received this supplement. ICPA (Aust) is grateful to the Federal Government for recognising the need for educational support after this horrendous event and appreciates the quick action in providing financial recognition to keep these geographically isolated children at school.

ICPA (Aust) is hopeful that while this funding was provided in a different platform than assistance for education being sought for drought affected families, that it might be seen as a precedence, and will possibly assist in bringing about realisation that educational assistance for drought impacted families is crucial as well.

**Mental Health for Boarders** Mental wellbeing, particularly for students who live away from home for schooling, has been a focus in our boarding discussions. 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.

A floor motion at last year's conference requested that boarding school/hostel staff have Youth Mental Health First Aid training. Options are being explored to take this motion forward with boarding schools and boarding school associations.

ICPA (Aust) also assisted UNICEF in coordinating a trip to rural NSW areas to talk with children to assess the impact the drought is having on them and Federal Council welcomed their report which contained very upfront comments, released on 18 February 2019. The report can be found at [https://www.unicef.org.au/our-work/unicef-in-australia/the-drought-report?fbclid=IwAR1l\\_DzImmXE-7If0wOW4QQaG3OoFPNvckOOi69X2VhDSkTvRTB4Tg52ynA](https://www.unicef.org.au/our-work/unicef-in-australia/the-drought-report?fbclid=IwAR1l_DzImmXE-7If0wOW4QQaG3OoFPNvckOOi69X2VhDSkTvRTB4Tg52ynA)

Further to the UNICEF report, UNICEF is initiating a Youth Summit to bring together young people in rural drought affected areas. ICPA (Aust) has been assisting with connections for this summit and suggestions for the initial committee and hopes that a number of rural and remote students will be able to take part.

**Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC)** Motions requesting an increase to the AIC and adjustment to the different components of the allowance have been raised through letters written to government, delegations and meetings with the Departments of Education and Training, Human Services and Social Services. While a sympathetic ear is often afforded, ICPA (Aust) is still working on having these changes come to fruition.

At the 2018 Federal Conference, ICPA members supported a motion asking ICPA (Aust) to seek the undertaking of a review of the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) and Federal Council raised this at our delegations in November. Interest in an AIC review was expressed by a number of government representatives and Federal Council were encouraged to hear that one Minister planned to formally request such a review. Our request for a review of AIC was also included in our briefing papers as part of our federal election campaign. Federal Council are still waiting to hear of progress on the possibility of a review.

Over the Christmas break, Federal Council supported ICPA members who received AIC payment duplications and cancellation letters. Federal Council also held discussions with the Department of Human Services regarding solutions for these situations and the effect these multiple payments and cancellation letters have on families. These issues further strengthen ICPA (Aust)'s call for online renewal and processing. ICPA (Aust) will continue to pursue an AIC online renewal process as an option along with other concerns associated with the AIC application, approval and implementation process.

ICPA (Aust) has been assured that AIC payments in 2019 will be paid on the dates published on the ICPA website which will assist families with planning.

**Fringe Benefit Tax (FBT)** ICPA (Aust) continues to raise in delegations with the Federal Government, the removal of the FBT incurred by employers who assist employees living in rural and remote locations with the huge out-of-pocket costs associated with boarding children away from home for their schooling. In October 2018, ICPA (Aust) also wrote to Federal Treasurer, the Hon. Josh Frydenberg MP expressing our members' concern of this issue. The Hon. Stuart Robert MP, Assistant Treasurer, replied to our request suggesting that ICPA (Aust) consider putting forth the information around this issue into a submission for the Productivity Commission Review into Remote Area Tax Concessions and Payments. This submission was lodged in May 2018 and can be found at this link <https://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1198/federal-submissions/remote-area-tax-concessions-and-payments-productivity-commission-review-2019.pdf>. ICPA (Aust) also attended a consultation with the Productivity Commission in the process of this review.

**Bank Accounts and Boarding Students** At the 2018 Conference, a motion was presented requesting that ICPA (Aust) raise awareness with banks regarding young students and their need to have access to bank accounts and cash withdrawal cards from an early age as a result of some students 11 years old and younger being away from home for schooling. This resulted in an article being published in the January 2019 edition of Pedals magazine. A resource document, available on the ICPA (Aust) website, was also created which offers boarding parents some suggestions for consideration when discussing their students' banking needs including possible questions to ask when seeking to open an independent bank account for students. Follow this link to view the Banking and Boarding Students document on our website. <https://www.icpa.com.au/page/attachment/130/banking-doc-for-pedals-jan-19>

**Boarding Interest from the Media** During June 2019, The Australian Financial Review published a number of articles relating to boarding schools and the schooling option they offer to students. ICPA (Aust) was interviewed for the articles and have shared them on Facebook. Over the series there are comments on the benefits of boarding and effects of drought on boarding families. The articles make reference to ICPA and the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA) which provided statistics, tables and figures around boarding that will be useful in future discussions with government.

ICPA Federal Council will continue to advocate strongly for geographically isolated families who must seek boarding schools to access their compulsory education and the many issues associated with this. We encourage all ICPA members to actively participate and share any concerns or issues that they feel Federal Council may assist with.

I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank our dedicated and hardworking team of Federal councillors who have contributed to this portfolio: Kate Thompson, Alana Moller, Christie Goddard, Kristen Coggan and Nikki Macqueen and our President Mrs Wendy Hick.