

## **BOARDING/ HOSTELS/ SECOND HOME PORTFOLIO REPORT**

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As I write this report all ICPA State Councils across Australia continue to work hard to ensure their state and interstate boarders are able to return to school during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. Frustrations have run high with families desperate to see their children return to their boarding facility and back into their classrooms.

Federal Council actioned twenty-one Boarding/Hostels/Second Home motions from the 2019 Federal Conference held in Adelaide. A total of 53 letters were sent to the relevant Ministers and Senators from ICPA (Aust) regarding those 21 motions which were then followed up at delegations held in Canberra during October 2019. During the COVID-19 period it was advised that the Minister Assisting the Minister for Trade and Investment, Minister for Decentralisation and Regional Education Hon Andrew Gee MP, would undertake issues related to Boarding/Hostels/Second Home. ICPA Federal President Alana Moller has met with Minister Gee to discuss these issues and we look forward to continuing that relationship into the future.

During Term 1 when students were beginning to be sent home from Boarding Schools due to the COVID restrictions, there was talk of continued school shut downs in Term 2 and members became concerned about the payment of the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Boarding Allowance. Some Boarding Schools ceased fees while students were not in the boarding house while others did not, so a one rule applies did not fit every scenario. After some anxious moments it was announced that the AIC would remain intact and unaltered for all of Term 2 and we are pleased to see this continuing for Term 3. We thank the Federal Government and Minister for Families and Social Services, Senator the Hon Anne Ruston for considering our rural and remote families in such a stressful time.

At the end of 2019 ICPA (Aust) was informed that an AIC online application/renewal system was forecast to be rolled out sometime from mid-2020 to mid-2022. Due to the current crisis situation ICPA (Aust) has contacted Services Australia to appeal to fast-track the delivery of this system as self-isolation restrictions may stay in place as we near the end of the 2020 year.

Work is continuing to raise awareness that the removal of Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) on contributions to employees' children's compulsory education expenses would potentially encourage families to stay in rural and remote Australia, improve recruitment and retention of staff while encouraging employers to contribute to the increasingly high costs associated with educating rural and remote children. The Government has stated that employers currently benefit from existing FBT concessions for certain housing related benefits such as electricity, gas or other residential fuel and holiday travel for employees and their families living and working in remote areas. In the Government's opinion any further concessions, including education expenses, would come at a cost to revenue and would need to be balanced against other Government priorities. We shall continue to bring this issue to the forefront whenever possible.

Minister for Health, the Hon Greg Hunt MP replied to our letter requesting the Federal Government provide mental health resources which will ensure rural and remote children have the capability to cope with dire situations and to address increasing mental health issues in boarding schools. We were alerted to the Government's investment programs including Empowering our Communities, Reachout and the expansion of Telehealth access to psychological therapies which are all available to boarding school students from rural and remote areas. Interestingly, \$98.6 million has been committed to Beyond Blue to deliver a school-based mental health initiative called Be You which assists early learning educators and teachers to teach children and young people skills for good social and

emotional development and recognise mental health difficulties. Boarding schools are eligible to access Be You at no cost and currently there are over 85,300 individual users registered and 6,202 schools participating. Federal Council encourages families to make contact with their respective boarding schools to ask about their individual programs.

ICPA (Aust) has met with the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA) to discuss what can be done by boarding schools in regards to the mental health of students impacted by drought and it was also mentioned during a meeting with Dolly's Dream in November 2019. Federal Council appreciates the work of several State Councils who have sent out letters to boarding schools in their states reiterating the mental health concerns of their rural and remote students, hoping to raise awareness of the situation many of these children have been dealing with during the drought, in turn supporting our advocacy.

Another concerning topic for members is the Socio-Economic Status Score Methodology proposed by the National School Resourcing Board Review. This comprehensive review in 2018 saw the Government accept all six recommendations made by that Board. This includes that from 2020 the capacity to contribute of a school should be determined based on a direct measure of median income for parents and guardians of the students at a school.

A Technical Working Group has been established by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment to provide advice on refinement and implementation of the direct measure of the capacity to contribute with particular focus on the impact the new measure has on regional, rural and remote families including boarding schools. The Government believes that the use of parent and/or guardian income in a direct measure is likely to reduce the need for schools to appeal their Capacity to Contribute scores as these scores are based on actual data collected rather than an average for an area.

ICPA (Aust) has raised concern regarding this measure directly with the Minister's office during our delegations in October 2019. Federal Council completed a submission into the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee Inquiry - Australian Education Amendment (Direct Measure of Income) Bill 2020 [Provisions] to highlight the impacts this new funding arrangement may have on the schools our member families rely upon to educate their children. We also requested that appropriate provisions be put in place to limit these impacts. We continue to hold conversations with the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA), and Federal Council participated in the Direct Measure of Capacity to Contribute Consultative Reference Group Forum on Tuesday 17 March held by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Skill and Employment in Canberra. ICPA (Aust) will continue to raise this issue wherever we can, as we are concerned about the impact it may have on our rural and remote boarders. We have been working collaboratively with ICPA State Councils and have asked for feedback and information they may have regarding the impact on schools and ICPA families. We would appreciate any further information any State Council or branch may have at this time to help us further this discussion.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my fellow portfolio holders Lisa Slade, Briony Sinclair, Kristen Coggan and Nikki Mahony for their support over the past year. Congratulations and thank you to President Alana Moller for a job well done in her first year at the helm. It certainly has not been an easy year especially in the boarding sphere however Alana has handled every situation with her trademark determination and grace.