

# **RURAL SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL TRAVEL REPORT**

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It is a privilege to be able to deliver this report for the first time as leader of the Rural Schools and School Travel Portfolio. Despite many challenges across the past year, ICPA (Aust) has continued to advocate for access and equity in educational outcomes for families whose children attend rural schools and those with travel requirements for attending their places of education.

The 2019 Federal conference established four main areas of focus for Federal Council's attention in this portfolio:

- Supporting the implementation of the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) recommendations
- maintaining the chaplaincy program in schools
- advocating for the establishment of student concessional fares
- advancing the residential fares scheme in air travel.

These areas have remained a focus for Federal Council as well as the other areas of advocacy that remain in policy for the Rural Schools and School Travel portfolio. An outline of all areas of advocacy can be found in the current ICPA (Aust) advocacy document

<https://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1241/federal-current-issues/current-icpa-aust-advocacy.pdf>

## **RURAL SCHOOLS**

Remote and isolated locations in Australia provide great challenges for improving delivery of education options and pathways for children and their families. The options for educating children in rural and remote locations continue to diminish and can be attributed to many leaving these areas.

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 time holding relevant governments to account to address inequities in rural schools.

Recommendations highlighting the need to focus on inequities in the educational outcomes of students in rural schools have been presented for many years, however little change to policy in this area has been forthcoming. Federal Council was thrilled when the government response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) included direct recommendations made by ICPA (Aust). The Australian Government response to the IRRRRE saw regional, rural and remote areas at the forefront of the outcomes presented <https://www.education.gov.au/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education>

## **Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) – Final Report**

Following on from the motion presented in 2019 requesting that ICPA (Aust) supports states to lobby to implement the recommendation “to reduce the impact of administration on workloads to create more time for teaching and leading learning” (Halsey, 2018, p.37), Federal Council has ensured all State and Territory Rural Schools portfolio leaders have received a copy of the final report. An invitation has also been extended to contact Federal Council if there are suggestions of ways we can support implementation of this initiative at a state level and to share real-life scenarios and case studies to help us to present the reality of what rural schools are facing in a meaningful and robust way and arm us with the pictures that will keep things relevant.

If any member, Branch or State Council has any further information or case studies that they can share with us, we welcome the information. Federal Council will continue to look at ways to support State and Territory Councils in addressing this concern.

### **Chaplaincy Program in Schools**

Federal Council welcomed the announcement that the Australian Government is investing \$247 million over four years (2019-2022) to renew the National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP). Federal Council wrote to Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education and other relevant shadow ministers, passing on ICPA (Aust)'s appreciation for the announcement of further continued funding for the Chaplaincy program and reinforced the importance of and the need for ongoing funding for the Chaplaincy Program in rural and remote schools. ICPA (Aust) is heartened that funding will continue to support approximately 3000 schools per year to access the services of a qualified chaplain including providing access to these services in our nation's most remote or very isolated areas. During our delegation meeting in October 2019 with Minister Tehan, Federal Council reinforced the necessity of the ongoing provision of the Chaplaincy Program for our rural and remote students.

### **SCHOOL TRAVEL**

Regional airfares should be affordable and services adequate, consistent and reliable to better assist regional residents trying to provide equitable educational opportunities for their children. 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 recognition of this. Road safety for students also remains an ongoing concern.

Federal Council has taken forward member requests that rural and remote students should receive a Student Fare Allowance that reflects the actual costs involved to get students from their home to their place of education within Australia. The inequity that exists for school travel across Australia is to the detriment of rural and remote students, particularly given the limited options for education where they live.

Currently there are inequities in Student Travel Allowances offered by the Commonwealth. Whilst the 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 access.

### **Student Concessional Fares**

Federal Council has raised the need for student concessional fares directly with relevant airlines as well as in discussions during delegations to Parliament. Given airlines and relevant transport authorities are reluctant to provide student concessions across the board, to date we have had little traction. We do however recognise the genuine need for a solution and will continue to raise this issue wherever possible. Further opportunities for negotiations regarding discounted regional fares directly with airlines have not been possible this year due to continued travel bans and restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic that have placed considerable direct pressure on airline operations.

### **Resident Fares Scheme**

Federal Council has continued our discussions with QANTAS in relation to their Residents Fares Scheme. We welcomed the announcement in August 2019 that QANTAS will invest up to \$10 million each year in providing flight discounts for residents in 16 towns across Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia.

The improvements to the program include the removal of the \$99 flight change fee for new bookings made through the resident fare website. While this does not yet allow for one way fares to be booked within the scheme, it is hoped that the flexibility provided in being able to change bookings without penalty will allow for trips for boarders' weekends and end of term breaks to be made in advance. We recognise that although this goes part of the way to help address this issue, it does not provide a solution for families who cannot afford to purchase advance fares. A further improvement is the capping of fares at some locations so that the maximum residents will pay will be approximately \$400 per sector when booking return journeys.

The initial rollout of the program expansion happened in Mount Isa, Cloncurry, Longreach, Barcaldine, Blackall, Karratha, and Kalgoorlie. Regional airports and councils in these towns committed to reducing the fees they charge each passenger, which are built into airfares.

QANTAS is consulting with local airports and councils in the other towns in the program: Moranbah, Roma, Charleville, Broome, Port Hedland, Newman, Paraburdoo, Alice Springs and Yulara (Ayers Rock) and has called on these regional airports and councils to implement similar fee reductions for residents.

Following concerns that some privately owned airports were not taking on board capping of airfares, at the Joint Councils meeting in February, Federal President Alana Moller spoke with State Presidents on the possibility of State Councils approaching the relevant entities in their state to encourage them to consider capping.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a considerable effect on both the ability to travel and the availability of flights. With airlines initiating a major wind back of services, redundancies and cost cutting exercises, many are unable to provide certainty of future viability. The ongoing ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are still quite unknown however Federal Council are maintaining our contact with QANTAS and regional airlines, and we will continue to raise issues wherever possible.