

RURAL SCHOOLS /TRAVEL REPORT

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Rural Schools

Rural Schools remain a focus for Federal Council. The results of the recent Boarding Schools Access Survey continues to highlight the many issues faced by our members and their families. While this survey was undertaken to primarily gather information regarding access to boarding school, comments made by those completing the survey also highlighted the needs families required in local rural schools if they were available to them. Access to an equitable education for our students is continuing to be a priority and a challenge for many of our members. The survey data and personal stories contained within the report, serve to reinforce the incredible lengths respondents are going to, to ensure their children can access an education similar to that of children in more populated areas. The full report can be found on the ICPA website: <http://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1021/federal-icpa-portfolios/federal-boarding-portfolio/boarding-school-survey-results-april-2016.pdf> however I have included the following excerpt from the research paper:

While small secondary schools provide an important opportunity for schooling for those who attend them, they should not be determined as meeting the needs of all students living in that area. Education is a much broader issue than just basic academic subjects. It encompasses life skills, cultural experiences, sporting opportunities and exposure to experiences beyond those available in a local environment. Most of these cannot be accessed by extension programs via video-conferencing or virtual classrooms. There may be a need for a culture that offers more challenges or greater opportunities for particular students to develop a sense of self-worth and confidence in choosing career pathways. These surely are vital ingredients for young people in an ever-changing and challenging world in general and particularly in rural and remote Australia.

Many comments in the survey were received on the inequalities experienced by families not able to access financial assistance to access an appropriate education to meet the needs of their children. A number of comments were made by families living in or near small communities with a small secondary school, about the ability of that school to meet the needs of their children. Students in rural and remote communities are identified as educationally disadvantaged simply due to their location and are deprived of a variety of educational opportunities because of small enrolments. Families in these small communities are not able to access any assistance to send their children to boarding school unless the local school is nominated by that State as a bypass school or there are special circumstances applicable to the family situation which meets the AIC guidelines. Our organisation is concerned to read the many comments outlining the lengths families are going to, in order to access an affordable education, some seeing families separating with the mother and children relocating to larger centres.

In order for rural schools to be able to offer quality education that meets the needs of students living in these areas, they must be equipped with adequate resources. These resources include not only learning materials, technology and the appropriate number of staff but also internet and communications. The aim must also be to employ teachers with a sound knowledge and understanding in applying flexible teaching methods in the varying classrooms of rural schools, which can include a variety of challenges and often be multi-age cohorts. Teachers, particularly those in their first years of practice, need to be sufficiently mentored and supported. University courses for teachers considering rural teaching need to encompass skill sets specific for rural teaching (e.g. rural curriculum courses, specific needs training) in order to offer high quality education to children in rural schools.

The Australian Human Rights Commission last held an inquiry in this area in 2001- aimed at investigating the level of access to information technology within our schools. We feel the time has come for a renewed conversation around the rights of our children in terms of educational access.

The most recent study done in the area of teaching frameworks and learning gaps in our education system was done by the Grattan Institute <http://www.grattan.edu.au/report/widening-gaps/> . Alarmingly the report found an ever widening gap in student's educational achievements and benchmark data as reported in NAPLAN results. The report found: *the learning gaps between Australian students of different backgrounds are alarmingly wide and grow wider as students move through school. Importantly, the learning gaps grow much larger after Year 3. Disadvantaged students are falling further behind each year they are at school. Bright kids in disadvantaged schools show the biggest losses, making two-and-a-half years less progress than students with similar capabilities in more advantaged schools.*

Rural schools continue to be classified as educationally disadvantaged due to their location and as such see, firsthand, the increasing disparity in educational options for our children.

Travel

Following a number of motions presented and passed at the ICPA Federal Conference in Brisbane last year, it appeared the ongoing problem of price increases during holiday periods, still pose a major challenge for many families. The extensive survey completed by our members in early 2016 – looking at the issues of boarding schools and available subsidies, highlighted the increasing costs of transport to and from schools, which continues to be a major burden for rural and remote families, who live great distances from their boarding school and for whom public transport is not an option.

Contact was once again made with the major national airlines, they responded with a generic reply, suggesting that members consider the timing of bookings and also the frequency of sales and special offers to be able to access cheaper flights.

Encouragingly, progress has been made on a more regional level with some regional government councils who are able to negotiate directly with the local carriers and provide subsidised residential airfares.

With regard to travel subsidies for primary and secondary students– the difficulty arises in that these are assessed and paid by the State Governments and they vary considerably around the country. Many of our State Councils are lobbying hard for a fairer and more equitable subsidy system and I thank them for the hard work they are performing.

With the recent changes to the eligibility criteria for Youth Allowance, I encourage all those who are in receipt of this allowance, to also apply for the Fare Allowance. The eligibility criteria can be found at <https://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/enablers/eligibility-fares-allowance> . The level of support varies and applications can either be made in advance of travel or retrospectively.