

PORTFOLIO REPORTS - STATE COUNCIL

ALLOWANCES REPORT

Jane Cunningham – Portfolio Leader, March 2025

Table of BAHA Rates 2013 – 2025:

2013	\$2,105
2014	\$2,105
2015	\$2,105
2016	\$2,105
2017	\$2,105
2018	\$1,948
2019	\$1,791
2020	\$1,634
2021	\$1,477
2022	\$1,320
2023	\$1,350
2024	\$1,389
2025	\$1,424

Table of Applications 2014 – 2024:

School Year	Total Applications
2014	1247
2015	1397
2016	1503
2017	1453
2018	1244
2019	1375
2020	1338
2021	1279
2022	1190
2023	1077
2024	1005*

*Applications still being accepted and paid

ICPA (WA) is committed to advocating for a significant increase in the Boarding Away from Home Allowance (BAHA) to close the gap that rural and remote families currently pay to access a high school education for their children.

Early in 2024 State Councillor Chandra Ridley wrote to the Minister for Education requesting a substantial increase to the BAHA. The response from the Minister is as follows.

“I wish to advise that at this time, the Western Australian Government is not in a position to consider further increases to the BAHA supplement.”

“The Western Australian Government acknowledges the cost-of-living pressures affecting families throughout the State and has already introduced a range of measures aimed at alleviating this financial strain, including the recently announced WA Student Assistance Payment for every student in Kindergarten to Year 12.

The Western Australian Government has also demonstrated this commitment through a range of election commitments, including improving school infrastructure and the provision of modern science, technology, engineering, and mathematics facilities, as well as allocating resources to support the learning outcomes of regional students.”

Whilst these initiatives are welcome, it does not address the fact that where children cannot access high school, they are left significantly out of pocket paying for residential accommodation and care.

Following the welcome announcements in 2024 for free VacSwim enrolments and pool entry, and free passes for Perth Zoo entry ICPA (WA) wrote a letter to Minister for Education Hon. Dr Buti and Premier Roger Cook, once again calling for a significant increase to the BAHA.

“The Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association of Western Australia welcomes the recent announcements of free VacSwim enrolments and entry for December and January, free zoo passes for everyone and most recently free travel and entry to Rottnest Island this weekend. Free activities such as these have great benefit for Western Australian families, and we wish all that can travel and attend these venues an enjoyable time.

ICPA (WA) would like to point out the difficulties that rural and remote families have accessing such free activities and urge the Western Australian Government to invest in geographically isolated families by increasing the Boarding Away from Home Allowance (BAHA) by a significant amount to assist families to access a high school education.”

Data tables presented outlined the costs associated with members in different areas of Western Australia to attend VacSwim and the Perth Zoo.

It was clear in the figures provided that the costs associated with participating in VacSwim programs and a trip to the Perth Zoo, along with the ever-increasing costs of living, make such opportunities for our country children more difficult.

Rural and remote families need tangible assistance with the true cost of educating their children. ICPA (WA) is calling upon the State Government to significantly increase the BAHA to better reflect the true cost of accessing education in rural and remote areas of Western Australia. Real support for families who already find themselves out of pocket compared to their metropolitan counterparts to access a high school education would very clearly benefit families.

The 2025 Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Boarding Allowance is currently \$10,338 and BAHA for 2025 is \$1,424; the total being \$11,762. Department of Education residential fees are currently set at \$15,536 in Western Australia, leaving a shortfall of nearly \$4,000. This does not consider additional expenses such as kilometres travelled, accommodation required when travelling and days parents and caregivers spend away from work to drive their children to and from a residential facility.

It is imperative that the BAHA is significantly increased to help address this inequity in education.

ICPA (WA) is happy to be contacted for further information to ensure equitable education is available for our regional, rural and remote children and to meet to discuss this matter further. This is also an area that is currently absent from the Draft Regional Education Strategy, and we look forward to seeing its inclusion in the final document.

ICPA (WA) State Council met with Minister Buti again in October to discuss the BAHA amongst other things. Following this meeting another letter was sent, this time highlighting the declining numbers of BAHA recipients over the past eight years. In 2016 there were 1,503 recipients, with just 1,077 in 2023. Case studies were included, clearly outlining the huge gap that is not covered by the BAHA and AIC.

Disappointingly this was part of the response from Minister Buti.

“The State Government acknowledges the financial challenges faced by geographically isolated families and has committed to providing annual increases to the BAHA to ensure that out-of-pocket expenses for students who board at the state’s public boarding facilities do not increase as a proportion of the boarding fee from 2023 onwards.

The ICPA’s proposal to further increase the BAHA must also be balanced against other government priorities across all portfolios and considered in the broader context of prudent fiscal management of the state’s finances. I acknowledge ICPA’s request and will take this into consideration.’

At the time of drafting this report, the state election campaigns were well underway.

The Nationals had pledged to increase the BAHA to \$2,700, Liberals to \$3,000, no word on an increase by the Labor Government.

COMMUNICATIONS REPORT

Sally Brindal – Portfolio Leader, March 2025

Telecommunication technology is developing at an exponential rate. While this has resulted in a number of enhancements and improvements for rural and remote communications, the portfolio remains a focus for State Council to guarantee communications services are maintained and continue to be enhanced to ensure our rural and remote students and their families are always provided with adequate communications services commensurate to their needs.

TELSTRA

3G CLOSURE

3G is now gone, but for some Australians, reliable 4G coverage has not arrived. It would be an understatement to say the shutdown of the 3G network on 28 October 2024 has provided an equivalent or better 4G experience. Members have reported, and continue to report, a lack of 4G coverage where there previously was 3G coverage and call dropouts in existing 4G areas. These concerns are continually raised with Telstra at a federal level and with the Minister for Communications. Unfortunately, no solutions appear to be forthcoming with Telstra continuing to claim consumers are reporting an equivalent or better experience!!

Telstra have launched their [3G Helpline](#) to further support customers who need more help with the transition. Telstra will work with customers 1:1 to troubleshoot their issues. For some, this may be quite straight forward with device setting updates, upgrading to a blue tick device or installing a go repeater. For others, it may require escalating it to their colleagues to better understand what the network experience is in that specific location so they can provide advice: <https://www.telstra.com.au/exchange/telstra-3g-network-shutdown--accessing-support-and-transitioning>.

Key information:

- Customers can call 1800 990 853 between 8am to 7pm Monday to Friday AEDT.
- Different device types and the diversity of Australia's landscape mean that each customer's experience is unique, which is why they want to work directly with each customer to help troubleshoot.
- The helpline is staffed by a team of agents with deep knowledge on the transition to help troubleshoot why mobile experience may have changed.
- [Telstra/3G closure](#) is their main hub with guidance for customers to self-serve some of the basic troubleshooting: <https://www.telstra.com.au/support/mobiles-devices/3g-closure>

Telstra have not put a timeframe on how long the helpline will operate for. They will continue to review the volume and types of calls and make their decision on longevity as things progress.

Telstra offer the following steps you can take to get the best out of 4G and 5G coverage.

1. Always update your phone's software. Check your software is updated and network settings are correct, then set your network to automatic. **TIP:** To make sure you have the latest software update, power cycle your phone by turning it off for a few minutes and then turning it back on. This forces the phone to refresh its network settings and will bring up the latest software update available.

2. In a regional, rural or remote area? For optimal coverage, Telstra recommend a Bluetick device. You can also consider getting [coverage extension devices](#) for home or on the road.
3. Ensure your Telstra Go Repeater or Cel-Fi Go is set up for 4G. Make sure it is [configured correctly to boost 4G signal](#).
4. Check your location on Telstra [coverage maps](#). Telstra 4G coverage is equivalent to sites previously covered by 3G on our maps but remember that these maps are a guide only.

Remember, fewer bars of coverage on your new phone does not mean less service – there are no 4G standards for signal bars.

RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT REFERENCES COMMITTEE (RRAT)

The Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee chaired by Senator Matt Canavan has handed down a long-awaited report into the shutdown of 3G networks. It made three relatively simple recommendations after several months of consultation.

The Committee recommended that:

- The Australian Government has established a program to assist consumers who have lost mobile coverage following the 3G shutdown. This program should be co-funded by both industry and government and be for the purpose of purchasing connectivity equipment for use by residents in rural and remote areas. For example, subsidies could be provided to purchase:
 - Boosters for buildings and vehicles
 - Starlink or other low-earth orbit satellite equipment, including access to mobile phones by Starlink services; and
 - Replacements for equipment rendered obsolete by the 3G shutdown.
- The Australian Government and the telecommunications industry accelerate the introduction of mobile phone services via the Starlink network; and
- The Australian Government increased the scope of the National Audit of Mobile Coverage to include off-road areas (including on private land such as farming and grazing properties). This could be achieved by enabling technology for people to ‘pin’ the location where service is available. Data gathered should be cross-referenced with that of the mobile network operators and published in an easy access-to-access format.

STARLINK

Some customers may be transitioned to the new Telstra Starlink voice service with no installation or hardware cost and on the same monthly plan. You do not need to bundle with the data package.

Currently, there is very little information on how the system will work where multiple phone lines exist within the house. The service also comes with a 4G modem as backup should there be an issue with the satellite, but you need 4G coverage for that to be of use!

The Telstra Starlink bundle (voice/data) is \$125/mth plus cost of hardware but limited to 100Mbps download and 5Mbps upload. Existing Starlink customers can transition to the Telstra product.

Previously, Next G Wireless Link (NGWL) customers received support through a dedicated helpline. Unfortunately, there is currently no such support for NGWL customers transitioned to Starlink.

GOT YOUR OWN STARLINK KIT?

If you have already got a Starlink Kit, you may be able to use it with your new Telstra Satellite Internet plan. You will just need to:

- Cancel your service and transfer your Starlink Kit within your Starlink account, and
- Provide Telstra with your Starlink Terminal ID or Kit Serial Number during the ordering process.

How do I transfer my Starlink Kit to Telstra?

To transfer your Starlink Kit to Telstra:

1. Cancel your existing Starlink service through the Starlink customer portal on the Starlink website. Find the “Cancel Service” option under the “Manage” section on the homepage.
2. Unlock your Starlink Kit from your account by selecting “Transfer” after cancellation. This option is also under “Manage.” Note that your service will stop immediately upon transfer, regardless of the remaining time in your billing cycle.
3. Provide Telstra with your Starlink Terminal ID or Kit Serial Number during the ordering process.

Need to Know:

- For more details [visit Starlink Support](#) and search 'transfer to a reseller'
- Please be aware that transferring is not available on the Starlink website until 120 days after you purchase your Starlink Kit or 90 days after you activated your kit, whichever milestone you hit first. Reach out to Starlink Customer Support for further assistance.

Where do I find my Starlink Terminal ID or Kit Serial Number?

- **Starlink Terminal ID** can be found in your Starlink app when your kit is powered on. It appears in this format: 00000000-00000000-00000000. Enter it without the 'ut' at the start.
- **Starlink Kit Serial Number** is printed on the shipping label of your kit. For a standard kit, it is formatted as KIT00000000, and for a High-Performance kit, it is KITP00041112.

Check the table below to make sure your Starlink Kit is compatible with Telstra's satellite services.

Starlink Kit	Key Features	Compatible with Telstra Satellite Home Internet	Starlink Ethernet Adapter needed
Standard Actuated Starlink Kit	Terminal with built-in motor for self-orientation. Previously Standard (Rectangular) Starlink Kit.	Yes	Yes
Standard Starlink Kit	Terminal without built-in motor for self-orientation and kickstand mount.	Yes	No
High Performance Starlink Kit	Terminal designed for higher performance with built-in motor for self-orientation.	Yes	No
Flat High Performance Starlink Kit	Terminal designed for higher performance, without built-in motor for self-orientation.	Yes	No

Important

If you're bringing your own Standard Actuated Starlink Kit, you will need the Starlink Ethernet Adapter. The Starlink Ethernet Adapter is a must-have for linking your Telstra Smart Modem 3 to the Starlink router, granting access to your Satellite Home Internet for users of the Standard Actuated Starlink Kit. If the ethernet adapter is not included in your kit, you can purchase the Starlink Ethernet Adapter from our Accessories store.

Starlink has an additional product, Starlink Mini. The dish is a smaller form version of the standard Starlink hardware and will be approximately the size of a MacBook. Speeds through the Starlink Mini will be capped at 100Mbps but will retain low latency advantages of the standard product. Starlink owner Elon Musk signalled on X that the upfront cost of the new dish and ongoing monthly prices will be approximately half that of the standard. However, this did not hold true with the hardware a similar price and unlimited plans more expensive than the current residential plan.

TELSTRA BELONG NETWORK

Telstra Belong is now promoting the School Student Broadband Initiative. Telstra Belong offers low cost mobile and nbn plans backed by Telstra, similar to Boost Mobile and others. Be sure to check terms and conditions as to what exactly the plans offer.

LANDLINES

There is currently no mandate for the removal of landlines, so the existing Universal Service Obligations (USO) and Customer Service Guarantees (CSG) are still very much active. Telstra are obliged to provide, maintain and repair landlines.

Some customers are being offered a NGWL service instead of repairing the landline, but this service requires power.

PREPAREDNESS ACTIVITIES

Telstra's preparedness activities and the initiatives available to help communities respond and recover when the worst happens include:

- **Extra data:** Postpaid mobile customers that are impacted in disaster-affected areas will automatically receive 100GB of extra data. Prepaid customers are eligible for 70GB of extra data that can be activated by SMS.
- **Upgraded payphones:** Telstra have updated almost 800 of the 1,000 payphones they are committed to delivering in disaster-prone areas by mid-2025. These upgrades provide free Telstra Wi-Fi, USB charging for devices, and backup power.
- **Telstra Response Team:** Telstra's team of technicians will be on the ground to restore connectivity and provide emergency services as soon as it is safe to do so when disaster strikes. At the same time, trained disaster assistance agents are available 24/7 to take calls and provide bill relief and other support. You can reach them on 1800 888 888.
- **Prepping temporary connectivity:** From their mobile Cell-On-Wheels (COWS), to deploying many more portable satellite kits to Telstra's teams in the field, they are getting equipment ready to help provide temporary Wi-Fi connectivity at priority locations if required when infrastructure is impacted.
- **Network inspections and maintenance:** Telstra are clearing vegetation and maintaining fire breaks at nearly 8,000 sites around the country. They have conducted hundreds of site inspections in cyclone risk areas and tested backup power supplies, including checking or replacing thousands of batteries.

ARE YOU E-PREPARED FOR A NATURAL DISASTER?

Summer in Australia brings natural disasters and emergency situations. Telstra has partnered with Justice Connected to develop a free online training tool that provides a simple guide to identifying your personal documents and how to store them safely.

[Learn how to e-prepare for a natural disaster.](#)

What if you couldn't prove who you are, where you live, or what you own?

If you're impacted by a disaster, having electronic copies of your essential documents can save you time, worry, and stress.

[Get started today](#)

How can we help you today?

Learn which documents to store

Use our checklist to build a personal list of documents relevant to you and your family.

[Go to the checklist](#)

Learn where to store documents

Browse the pros and cons of the most common storage solutions you may want to use.

[Go to the pros and cons](#)

Learn how to store documents

Follow step-by-step instructions to safely store your documents on your own, or with support.

[Go to the step-by-step instructions](#)

MOBILE BLACKSPOT

The government launched Round 8 of the Mobile Black Spot Program on 17 December 2024. Local councillors and State and Federal MPs can now nominate areas for funding through an online Project Noticeboard.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS CONSUMER PROTECTIONS

The Consumer Action Law Centre (CALC) has called for the direct regulation of telecommunications providers as essential services with appropriate protections. Commenting on the adequacy of the draft Telecommunications Consumer Protections (TCP) Code, CALC CEO Stephanie Tonkin said, *“it [the draft TCP Code] is riddled with vague promises and assertions, unenforceable guidance notes, and lacks the necessary firm commitments needed from telcos to assist customers in vulnerable circumstances”*.

The Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) has found that Australians living outside of metropolitan hubs are experiencing significant issues with their telcos. In its recent submission to the Regional Telecommunications Review (RTR), the TIO noted that it has received over 50,000 complaints from regional, rural and remote customers about faults, poor service quality, poor mobile coverage and outages since July

2021. Problems such as these can be particularly dangerous for consumers living in areas at greater risk of natural disasters. You can read more on the TIO website.

WA REGIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL

Following Telstra's review of the existing Regional Advisory Council (RAC) model in H1 FY24 Telstra made the decision to disband the state-based RAC's and evolve the RAC model into a national group – the Telstra Regional Council (TRC); the WA RAC, NSW RAC and QLD RAC are going to be combined to form a national RAC.

The TRC's purpose is to *provide strategic advice and guidance to Telstra on opportunities and challenges affecting regional and remote Australians. Members contribute regional, remote perspectives, and offer recommendations to help inform Telstra's decisions.*

Telstra collaborated with the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation (ARLF) to support the recruitment process.

ARLF received 87 Expressions of Interest (EOIs) through the recruitment process and then undertook an independent review to create a shortlist of 26 candidates, from which Telstra have invited 14 members to join the TRC. No organisations were invited to join. The inaugural TRC meeting will be held in Sydney from 18–20 September.

This is a very disappointing outcome as the previous state-based Regional Advisory Council provided rural and remote representation Australia wide. ICPA (WA) are still involved with a number of organisations associated with the telecommunications industry, ensuring the issues of rural and remote members are clearly heard.

UNIVERSAL SERVICES OBLIGATIONS (USO)

In significant news for Australians in regional areas, the government has announced an expansion of the Universal Service Obligation (USO) - a policy designed to ensure all Australians have access to essential telco services – to a Universal Outdoor Mobile Obligation (UOMO) by 2027. Traditionally, the USO focused on landlines, but in today's world, mobile and internet access are just as crucial.

Under the proposed Universal Outdoor Mobile Obligation (UOMO), which the government will legislate if re-elected at the forthcoming election, Australian mobile operators will be required to significantly expand mobile coverage, providing outdoor mobile coverage nearly everywhere in Australia via LEOSats Direct-to-Device technology, which will particularly impact regional and remote areas.

While this initiative recognises next generation technology, the government clearly stated that the importance of continued investment in existing terrestrial networks to underpin continued certainty is not being ignored, especially in our regional, rural and remote regions where it is needed to guarantee continued productivity and safety.

NBN

Legislation has been introduced to parliament that will make it harder to sell-off the NBN. From a consumer perspective, this is a welcome move. Australian taxpayers have outlaid around \$60 billion to build the NBN, and this change will ensure the public interest remains front and centre as we all reap the benefits of fast and reliable broadband. Debate on the Bill is set to continue.

FIXED WIRELESS UPGRADE

nbn has successfully completed its Fixed Wireless (FW) Upgrade Program, a major milestone in their commitment to improving regional and rural connectivity. This nationwide program has enhanced the capacity, performance, and coverage of their fixed wireless network, delivering faster speeds and greater reliability to homes and businesses across Australia.

Key benefits for those in regional and remote Australia include:

- **Faster speeds:** Around 800,000 homes and businesses can now enjoy faster speeds, including during busy periods.
- **New high-speed plans:** Two new high-speed tier plans are now available via participating retail service providers, offering peak wholesale nbn network download speeds of up to five times faster than what was previously available:
 - **Fixed Wireless Home Fast** is intended to be available to approximately 90 per cent of the expanded Fixed Wireless footprint. Fixed Wireless Home Fast has wholesale peak information rate speeds of 200-250/8-20Mbps. Check the nbn website to see what is currently available at your address: www.nbnco.com.au/check
 - **Fixed Wireless Superfast** is intended to be available to approximately 80 per cent of the expanded Fixed Wireless footprint. Fixed Wireless Superfast has wholesale peak information rate speeds of 400/10-40Mbps. Check the nbn website to see what is currently available at your address: www.nbnco.com.au/check
- **Expanded access:** More than 120,000 homes and businesses previously within the nbn Sky Muster satellite service footprint now have access to nbn Fixed Wireless for the first time.
- **Enhanced performance:** Improved network performance for uncapped data plans under nbn Sky Muster Plus.

This program complements nbn's other upgrade programs, such as the recently announced investment to upgrade around 622,000 premises remaining on Fibre to the Node technology, which is expected to benefit more than 300,000 homes and businesses in regional Australia.

Enhancements to nbn satellite services have been made possible due to the upgrades to the nbn FW network, which includes migrating around 120,000 premises from the nbn satellite footprint to access nbn Fixed Wireless for the first time. This is part of a nationwide upgrade program to deliver better broadband for homes and businesses across regional and remote Australia.

The new entry and mid-tier plans are now available through retailers at lower wholesale prices than the existing Sky Muster Plus Premium plan, which was introduced in June 2024.

The three plans now available are:

- **Sky Muster Plus Premium – high tier option:** Replaces the current nbn Sky Muster Plus Premium plan and offers uncapped data use with maximum wholesale speeds of 100/5Mbps at least once every 24-hour period and an anticipated typical busy period wholesale download speed of 48Mbps.
- **Sky Muster Plus Premium – mid tier option:** A new plan that offers uncapped data use with maximum wholesale speeds of 50/5Mbps at least once every 24-hour period and an anticipated typical busy period wholesale download speed of 31Mbps.
- **Sky Muster Plus Premium – entry tier option:** A new plan that offers uncapped data use with maximum wholesale speeds of 25/5Mbps at least once every 24-hour period and an anticipated typical busy period wholesale download speed of 16Mbps.

In addition to the new plans, nbn is also introducing other new features for Sky Muster Plus and Premium users such as the option to purchase dedicated static IP (internet protocol) addresses for users who wish to do things like remotely access their network from outside their property.

SCHOOL STUDENT BROADBAND INITIATIVE (SSBI)

Applications for a free National Broadband Network (nbn) service through the SSBI have been extended until December 2025, or until the 30,000 connections limit is reached with free internet until June 2028! The announcement was made mid-Jan 2025 as part of the 'Government Back to School'. Members can self-nominate through the [National Referral Centre](#). There are two criteria.

How to qualify for the School Student Broadband Initiative.

To qualify families and carers must:

- Have a school age student at home (full or part-time), enrolled in an Australian school up to Year 12 (including Prep in Qld/Vic/Tas, Kindergarten in NSW, Reception in SA, Transition in NT/ACT and Pre-Primary in WA).
- Not have an active nbn network internet service at your current residential address now or in the past 14 days (having a mobile internet service does not affect eligibility).
- Live in a premise that can access the nbn network through a standard connection.
- Families and carers can directly contact the National Referral Centre to check if they qualify or be referred by a participating nominating organisation.

To date more than 23,000 families are now receiving free internet connections via the School Student Broadband Initiative.

LOW EARTH ORBIT SATELLITE (LEOSat)

The government has announced a significant trial of fixed voice and Low Earth Orbit Satellite (LEOSat) connectivity. This is a notable step forward for consumers, particularly in regional areas. With direct to handset connectivity anticipated to provide mobile phones with voice and text capabilities in the future, these trials may inform future universal service policies. As part of the trials, the reliability and quality of voice calls will be tracked and impacts of weather conditions on services will be tested.

Approximately 250,000 Australians use the service, a significant slice of global users.

As first reported by CommsDay, Starlink has placed some Australian customers on waiting lists, citing limited capacity in certain areas of the country. Users in zones around Perth and Brisbane will have to wait for new capacity to come online before ordering and receiving their satellite dishes. Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) has confirmed this through attempts on the Starlink website to order the dishes to addresses in affected areas. PCMag reports that this is also occurring in parts of the US – a sign of the fast-growing popularity of the service.

Starlink has recently revealed a new product, Starlink Mini, which it plans to launch in coming months. The dish is a smaller-form version of the standard Starlink hardware and will be approximately the size of a MacBook. Speeds through the Starlink Mini will be capped at 100Mbps but will retain low latency advantages of the standard product. Starlink owner Elon Musk signalled on X that the upfront cost of the new dish and ongoing monthly prices will be approximately half that of the standard. If this holds true, Australian consumers could expect to pay \$250-300 for a Mini dish, and around \$70 per month for a speed capped service.

REGIONAL TECH HUB

Established in 2020, the Regional Tech Hub (RTH) is a centralised resource providing regional, rural, and remote residents with the critical support needed to navigate the complex world of connectivity and technology options. The RTH is a federally funded government initiative offering **independent** and **free**

information about digital technologies, services available, equipment solutions, setup and installation to regional, rural and remote Australians to get connected, stay connected and improve their connection.

The RTH aims to address the gap in digital inclusion between regional and metropolitan communities, by simplifying the noise, confusion, and frustration around phone and internet connectivity. If you answer yes, to any of the following questions, then the Regional Tech Hub can help you:

- Do you need to *get connected*?
- Are you wanting to *stay connected*?
- Would you like to *improve your connection*?
- Would you like to be able to *better use your connection*?

People living in rural, regional and remote Australia are encouraged to reach out to the Regional Tech Hub for independent support to address these four questions.

The RTH team are all based regionally across Australia and offers support via its [website](#), a phone support line 1300 081 029 and social media pages [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). Call them during the times below to speak to someone directly about your phone and internet options. Alternatively, complete the following options through their website:

- Book a time to speak with them through the 'Book an appointment' tab
- Ask for a free, customised Connectivity Report on your options
- Ask to progress an issue with your service provider using their Escalation Form
- Hotline/Live Chat Operating Hours (AEST/AEDT): Mon: 12pm – 5pm Tue: 12pm – 5pm Wed: 9am – 2pm Thu: 9am – 2pm Fri: 9am – 2pm.

Since December 2020, the Regional Tech Hub (RTH) has received close to 100,000 requests for help, including more than 70,000 website enquiries and helping close to 10,000 people with their mobile and internet connectivity options.

Of the queries received, maximising coverage through the nbn Sky Muster Satellite service was the most common advice sought, followed by requests for information on mobile broadband, mobile phone, nbn fixed wireless and nbn fixed line. Many queries are from people living with an unreliable service that is too expensive or does not meet data needs. In most cases, there are options available, of which the RTH can raise awareness of and ultimately help more people to find the best solution suited to their needs.

The RTH have launched a podcast - Tech Hub Talk. It is now available on all major podcast platforms!

Tech Hub Talk offers practical, easy-listening conversations hosted by Joshua Groch, featuring guest speakers discussing regional connectivity. The first season opens with a conversation about the 3G shutdown; why it was necessary and what you can do if you were caught off guard or are experiencing problems. Other episodes offer insights from various perspectives, including a bush connectivity advocate, a primary producer, and Telstra representatives and real-life stories of resilience, including handling natural disasters in remote areas and emergency preparedness.

Season One Episode Highlights:

- **Episode 1: 3G Shutdown** – A discussion with Kristy Sparrow from BIRRR on the impacts and what it means for regional users.
- **Episode 2:** Insights from a primary producer on adapting to the change.
- **Episode 3:** Telstra's perspective on the shutdown and future improvements.

- **Episode 4:** A pastoralist's experience with natural disaster recovery in Far North QLD.
- **Episode 5:** Preparing for emergencies and insights from emergency response teams.

Keep an eye on their socials for episode updates!

REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS INDEPENDENT REVIEW COMMITTEE (RTIRC) 2024

The Review occurs every three years and is an opportunity to examine the existing and future telecommunications needs in regional, rural and remote communities across Australia. The [Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee](#) has delivered its report to the Australian Government, informed by extensive consultation with people living and working in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia, sharing their views and experiences with connectivity.

The 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review 'Connecting communities, reaching every region' report and recommendations, are available in the following formats:

- [Connecting Communities, reaching every region \(PDF\)](#)
- [Connecting Communities, reaching every region \(DOCX\)](#)
- [Extract of the 2024 Recommendations \(PDF\)](#)

I must confess I have not read the whole **119-page** report! There were however, 14 recommendations that can be summarised as follows:

1. Upscaling connectivity literacy

The Committee recommends a significant increase in the focus and resources for connectivity literacy in regional, rural and remote Australia.

The Australian Government should:

- Develop a program to create Connectivity Champions.
- Develop high-quality connectivity literacy training programs to train Connectivity Champions, communities, businesses and other stakeholders.
- Refocus the Regional Tech Hub and increase funding to expand its capacity, boost awareness of its services, and improve its performance in providing existing core services.
- Review the Regional Tech Hub's scope, strategy and governance at the end of its current contract period.

2. Improving the mobile experience

The Committee recommends actions to improve mobile services, including addressing diminishing mobile experience in existing regional, rural and remote coverage areas.

The Australian Government should:

- Prioritise funding to improve existing terrestrial mobile network capacity, service quality, and resilience rather than further extending terrestrial coverage.
- Continue funding new terrestrial mobile coverage for critical areas like roads and leverage strategically located Wi-Fi hotspots where needed.
- Request the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) to conduct a new inquiry into mandatory domestic mobile roaming, considering emerging DTH (direct to handset) satellite technologies and its effect on competition.
- Mandate, at the earliest opportunity, emergency mobile roaming during disasters and expedite the regulatory and operational framework for its use.

- Increase consumer and business awareness of terrestrial mobile network alternatives like Wi-Fi calling and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services for fixed locations.
- Enhance the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA's) resources to enforce compliance against the sale and use of illegal mobile phone boosters and other unauthorised equipment and installation practices.

3. Expedite universal service modernisation

The Committee recommends the Australian Government expedite modernising the USO and the Statutory Infrastructure Provider (SIP) regime by merging them into a unified service obligation. NBN Co, as the provider of last resort, and other SIP operators would be required to provide voice-capable broadband services with minimum speeds and standards for all premises.

The Committee also notes that continued public ownership of NBN Co will be crucial to ensure that service standards are met under a modernised USO in regional, rural and remote Australia. The contractual Copper Continuity Obligation (CCO) should be phased out where and when proven and effective voice-capable broadband services are available.

The Committee further recommends:

- NBN Co be tasked and funded to implement, in consultation with industry stakeholders, a plan to manage the needs of different cohorts of regional, rural and remote users.
- The modernised USO be technology neutral.
- The modernised USO be flexible, ensuring that minimum speeds, quality and other standards are readily adaptable so they remain relevant to changing needs.
- Premises without terrestrial mobile coverage have access to an affordable secondary redundant broadband service, including optional battery backup, with government contributions as necessary.
- When a modernised USO is introduced, the Customer Service Guarantee (CSG) is updated and strengthened to provide appropriate protections for regional, rural, and remote consumers.
- Public phones (payphones) be embedded as a free service for domestic calls. Once current contractual obligations expire, the Australian Government should consider tendering for a provider to operate public phone services.

4. Consumer protection

The Committee:

- Recommends a full review of consumer protections and service standards to consolidate and strengthen protections contained in a multitude of legislative instruments.
- Supports the ongoing TCP Code review with a focus on strengthening enforceable consumer protections, in particular, ensuring commission-based sales incentives do not undermine the fair treatment of vulnerable consumers.

5. Affordability

The Committee recommends:

- The introduction of pre-paid, low-cost broadband plans in remote First Nations communities, as proposed by the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group.
- The Australian Government facilitate extending these options, promoting affordability and access for all regional, rural and remote Australians.

- Developing an initiative for unmetered access to critical government websites for users on limited data plans.
- Ongoing availability and funding for the School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI) to ensure all school-aged children have access to broadband internet, along with initiatives to increase awareness of the program in regional, rural and remote Australia.

6. Develop a national telecommunications data platform

The Committee recommends the Australian Government establish a national telecommunications data platform. Managed by the ACMA or the ACCC, the national platform should include:

- For consumers: an interactive online tool that allows consumers to easily access detailed information on broadband and mobile service availability in their area, helping them make informed decisions about their connectivity options across Australia.
- For the restricted use of Australian and state and territory governments: information about the location of telecommunications infrastructure assets for the purpose of investment and emergency planning and response.

Telecommunications providers should be required to supply data to governments in standardised formats to enable comparisons between locations and providers. This will enhance transparency in broadband and mobile coverage and help guide infrastructure investments, especially in underserved rural and remote areas.

The Committee further recommends that the Measuring Broadband Australia (MBA) program is continued beyond its current contract enabling the ACCC to monitor service performance.

7. Regional telecommunications strategy

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a regional, rural and remote connectivity strategy. The strategy should be a vision for regional telecommunications and guide future investment and the regulatory environment for the future.

8. Modernising government programs

The Committee recommends that rigorous evaluations of the Australian Governments current rounds of telecommunications investment programs be conducted to ensure public investment is well targeted and delivered effectively. Further, the government should ensure that future rounds of existing and new programs are fit for purpose by:

- Considering technology developments, such as LEO satellites and DTH capabilities.
- Mandating meaningful community engagement throughout each project phase, with special emphasis on First Nations communities both as titleholders and consumers.
- Prioritising competitive retail and infrastructure options where viable.
- Addressing connectivity literacy and affordability.
- Enhancing resilience and capacity.
- Recognising the value of cross-government collaboration and planning.

To increase transparency, the government should create a public website to track milestones for all funded telecommunications projects. This platform would keep regional, rural and remote communities informed about infrastructure rollouts by providing regular updates on timelines, potential delays, and their causes, thereby building trust and awareness of government efforts to improve connectivity.

9. Support for the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group

Recognising the value of the work of the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group, the Committee recommends that it be continued as a standing initiative. Consideration should be given to adopting relevant First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group recommendations across regional, rural and remote communities to address the digital divide.

10. Embedding community Wi-Fi

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government:

- Continue funding contributions for existing Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters (STAND) facilities.
- Invest in new community connectivity hubs to provide community Wi-Fi services during emergencies and natural disasters.
- Expand investment in mesh Wi-Fi networks in remote First Nations Communities, allowing a choice from a tailored menu of connectivity options that best meet local needs and noting that communities without mobile coverage should be prioritised.
- Invest in and promote free public Wi-Fi initiatives in key locations across regional, rural and remote Australia.

11. Transition oversight

The Committee recommends comprehensive independent monitoring and public reporting during large-scale telecommunications transitions, such as mobile technology switch-offs and the migrations required for modernising the USO. The ACMA could be well-placed to perform this role.

12. Expedite planning approval

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government should exercise its power to expedite planning approvals for large telecommunications infrastructure projects, such as tower installations in regional, rural and remote Australia and in instances where Australian Government funding has contributed to projects.

13. Powering connectivity

The Committee recommends that regulation be introduced to require:

- Minimum backup power periods for new critical telecommunications infrastructure installations in regional, rural and remote Australia, with existing assets to be captured over time. The backup period would be regularly reviewed to take account of changes in storage and network technology.
- Energy providers to give high priority to restorations of power for critical telecommunications infrastructure in regional, rural and remote Australia.
- Energy providers to prioritise energy connections for new telecommunications installations.

14. Evolution of Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committees

The Committee recommends replacing the current appointment of Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committees every three years with a permanent Regional Telecommunications Commissioner or Regional Telecommunications Advisory Panel. Given the rapid pace of technology change, increasing complexity of the market and the need to modernise the USO, continuous oversight is required.

SCAMS

[SMS Sender ID Register Legislation Goes Before Parliament](#)

Legislation to establish an SMS Sender ID Register was introduced to Parliament by Minister for Communications, Michelle Rowland and the Sender ID Register Bill has now passed Federal Parliament. The proposed Register aims to reduce the number of scams and help consumers identify legitimate texts from fraudulent ones. It is an important tool to combat SMS scams that consumers frequently experience. The ACMA will now move to establish and operate a Register. All industry participants need to do their part.

The federal governments planned SMS Sender ID Register will be mandatory rather than voluntary. This comes after a government trial of a voluntary register and consistent pressure from ACCAN (Australian Consumer Action Network) and the consumer sector to create a mandatory Register. 89% of respondents to consultation expressed a preference for a mandatory model. The Register will help to drive down the number of scams SMS Australians receive. Australians are frequently bombarded by scam texts – and from international experience (Singapore), a mandatory Register will make a difference.

National Scam Number

Telstra have a new short national number (7226) for customers to report suspected SMS and MMS scams.

Customers who forward SMS and MMS scams to 7226 (SCAM) will help Telstra better protect millions of Australians from receiving harmful SMS/MMS messages that may attempt to trick them into providing their personal information, credit cards, or downloading malicious apps.

Telstra have a [LINK \(https://www.telstra.com.au/exchange/almost-half-of-australians-use-a-weak-password-here-s-what-that\)](https://www.telstra.com.au/exchange/almost-half-of-australians-use-a-weak-password-here-s-what-that) available with simple tips and tricks on how to forward text messages, including video tutorials as well as tips on what to look for in a scam SMS and MMS.

Top five scam calls:

- **Amazon impersonation:** Scam calls about an issue with your Amazon account. They claim funds will be taken from your account if you do not act immediately by providing personal information.
- **Banking/finance impersonation:** Scam calls, emails and SMS claiming suspicious activity, unauthorised debits, or that your account has been suspended. They request personal details to verify your identity.
- **NBN impersonation:** Scam callers posing as someone from technical support. They claim there is a fault with your internet to get access to your computer and personal information.
- **Telstra impersonation:** Similar to the NBN scam. Callers pose as Telstra technical support and claim you have issues with your service or internet to access your computer and personal information.
- **eBay impersonation:** Scammers use a recorded message to claim you have made a purchase that requires a charge to your account. This is to get you to provide to personal information.

All five of the top reported scams impersonate trusted and well-known businesses, with scammers often displaying a fake number or sender information on your phone to make the contact look legitimate.

Many businesses clearly state they will not contact you out of the blue or send messages with links seeking financial information or personal details, so always treat these calls with caution.

How To Avoid Scams

- Do not provide your personal information to an unsolicited caller or sender of a message.

- Do not open links in any unsolicited messages you receive.
- If the brand has an app you can use instead of receiving messages, consider whether this will work for you. Messages you receive via the app are much more likely to be legitimate.
- Even if a message slips into a legitimate message stream on your phone, double-check that it is from the brand concerned.
- If in doubt, always contact the business via their publicly available contact details (or the details on your regular bill or transaction record) rather than the details provided by the caller or in a message.

Phishing

Hackers are going to great lengths, including mimicking real people and creating and updating fake social media profiles, to trick victims into clicking phishing links and handing over usernames and passwords.

The alert from the UK's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) - the cybersecurity arm of intelligence service GCHQ - warns that the phishing attacks are targeting individuals and organisations in a range of sectors.

The end goal of the phishing attacks is to dupe the victim into clicking malicious links that direct to fake, but realistic-looking, login pages, where the victim will enter their login credentials, providing the attackers with access to their account, which hackers abuse directly or use to gain access to other victims.

Many of the malicious links are designed to look like commonly used cloud software and collaboration tools, including OneDrive, Google Drive, and other file-sharing platforms. In one case, the attackers even set up a Zoom call with the victim and then sent a malicious URL in the chat bar during the call. They have also created multiple characters in the phishing thread (all controlled by the attackers) to add the appearance of legitimacy.

CHATGPT AND AI

ChatGPT has captured the internet's attention with millions using the technology to write poems, craft short stories, answer questions and even ask for advice - and "meanwhile, cybercriminals are using it to generate malicious threats through its impressive ability to generate human-like text that adapts to different languages and audiences.

According to recent Norton reports, the "Pulse Report" for 2024 highlights a significant rise in sophisticated scams utilizing AI technology, including deepfakes and AI-generated voices, making it harder to identify fraudulent activity, particularly in investment scams, "boss" email scams, and part-time job scams on platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram; essentially, cybercriminals are leveraging advanced AI tools to make scams appear more legitimate.

Key points from the Norton Pulse Report 2024:

- **AI-powered scams:** Expect a surge in scams utilizing AI-generated deepfake videos and voice messages to trick users into providing personal information or money.
- **Business Email Compromise (BEC) evolution:** "Business Communication Compromise (BCC)" scams will become more prevalent, where cybercriminals use AI to mimic a user's boss or colleague in emails.
- **Social media manipulation:** Social media platforms will be flooded with AI-generated scams, making it difficult to distinguish real from fake content.
- **Targeted digital blackmail:** Cybercriminals will leverage personal data to execute more sophisticated and targeted digital blackmail attempts.

What to do to stay safe:

- **Be vigilant about verifying information:** Always check the source of information, especially when dealing with financial transactions or sensitive personal details.
- **Keep software updated:** Regularly update your operating system and security software to protect against the latest threats.
- **Use strong passwords and multi-factor authentication:** Protect your accounts with strong passwords and enable multi-factor authentication where possible.
- **Educate yourself about emerging threats:** Stay informed about the latest scams and cyber threats to be able to identify them.

DISTANCE EDUCATION, SOTA AND CURRICULUM REPORT

Chandra Ridley – Portfolio Leader, March 2025

NAPLAN

On 14 August 2024 NAPLAN results were released. Nationally and across all states and territories, in all domains, the differences in average scores since 2023 were negligible. This is to be expected, given that only one year has elapsed since the NAPLAN measurement scales were reset.

There is a nationally higher proportion of Indigenous students needing additional support compared to the overall student population. A lower proportion of students in very remote schools are rated as *'strong'* or *'exceeding'* compared to students in major city schools.

Female students outperformed male students in writing, but the opposite occurred in numeracy.

Full NAPLAN results are available at www.acara.edu.au/naplanresults

SOTA

Carnarvon School of the Air (SOTA) has a new principal Lisa Coon following the retirement of Max Gromwald.

Esther Kerr has been appointed as Network Principal - Schools of the Air. Esther commenced in the role on 25 November 2024 until the end of 2025. As the current Principal of Kimberley School of the Air, Esther brings with her a wealth of experience and a passion for distance education.

Esther will work in collaboration with SOTA Principals and the broader SOTA community, including ICPA members, to develop and implement a range of strategies that will enhance success for remote students and strengthen and align the Schools of the Air practices.

In early March 2025, ICPA (WA) representatives were invited by Esther to meet with SOTA Principals, SOTA School Board Chairs and Sue Potter (REVISE). The focus of the meeting was to consult on the development of a Terms of Reference for a SOTA Parent Advisory Group. Esther anticipates that the Terms of Reference will be ready to implement later in March, and we look forward to the formation of the group.

In October Brian Abbey was appointed Principal of Port Hedland SOTA replacing Michael Jennings.

CURRICULUM

The School's Curriculum and Standards Authority released an initial series of videos in 2024 to support teaching and learning in the early years. New videos have now been released focusing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives to support early childhood educators. The Authority is also supporting the

training of early childhood teachers by developing a video for Western Australian universities to use with pre-service teachers to enhance their understanding of teaching in the early years.

The National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) will run from Wednesday, 12 March until Monday, 24 March 2025.

In November, a new online learning course went live. The new student diversity course for teachers is on the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) Professional Learning Hub. It assists teachers with developing a deeper understanding of the CASE (Curriculum, Abilities, Standards, Evaluation) model to personalise student learning:

- Exploring age/year level content descriptions and Achievement Standards in the Australian Curriculum.
- Identifying the strengths and barriers to learning for an entire class and individual students.
- Understanding how to apply universally designed strategies and instructional, environmental, and curriculum adjustments to address students' strengths and barriers to learning.

EARLY CHILDHOOD REPORT

Chelsea Mott – Portfolio Leader, March 2025

ACCESS FOR EVERY CHILD - REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE

In May 2024, the Access for Every Child Coalition launched a joint statement with over 50 organisations, led by The Parenthood urging all governments to implement six key actions to ensure universal access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for every regional, rural, and remote child in Australia.

The six key actions:

1. Strong public management for the ECEC system.
2. Supply subsidies for rural and remote providers.
3. Investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services.
4. A national workforce strategy, including training for First Nations educators.
5. Improved family day care and in-home care.
6. Interim solutions.

They also called on the public to email their relevant governments to help convince all state and territory governments to back their actions.

EARLY YEARS STRATEGY 2024-2034

The Federal Government released the Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 for all children aged 0 - 5 in Australia in May 2024.

The report outlines a vision to focus on the following four priority areas:

1. Value the early years.
2. Empower parents, caregivers and families.
3. Support and work with communities.

4. Strengthen accountability and coordination.

The Centre for Policy Development has released recommendations from a new report into making the sector more affordable and accessible. It has been recommended that families with a combined income of \$80k per year should be offered three days of daycare for \$30, and disadvantaged families under a combined income of \$80k should receive it for free.

The report argues childcare should be brought into line with other key services such as public education and Medicare to ensure accessibility for all.

The Federal Government is now awaiting a final report from the Productivity Commission into universal childcare.

The report also called for free preschool two days a week once the child turns three, followed by a small fee of \$10-\$15 for subsequent days.

A pay increase for providers was also recommended to cater to the demand that would come with lower pricing.

The 10 recommendations are suggested to take about a decade to implement if accepted and adopted by the government.

The final report was released to the government at the end of May 2024.

COUNTRY KIDS AND COMMUNITIES

An online event '*Country Kids and Communities*' hosted by Thrive by Five in June 2024 called for greater early learning investments in regional and rural Australia.

Guest speakers included Minister for Regional Development Kristy McBain and Shadow Minister Darren Chester, community advocates (Thrive by Five, SNAICC - National Voice for our Children, the Mitchell Institute, and Royal Far West, along with employees in the sector and regional parents.

FEDERAL CONFERENCE MOTIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PORTFOLIO

Fourteen motions were carried or deemed covered at the Federal Conference covering the following issues:

- AIC for pre-compulsory
- In-home care
- ECEC staff pay parity
- Universal access to ECEC
- Infrastructure and operational funding of rural and remote ECEC centres
- Mobile early learning
- Working Holiday Maker Visa program

PAY RISE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

A 15 per cent pay rise for early childhood educators and a cap on fee rises were announced in August 2024.

The pay rise will be implemented over two years and will help address a nationwide staffing crisis that has caused waiting times to blow out.

Services whose staff receive the Federal Government funded pay rise will not be able to raise the fees they charge parents by more than 4.4 per cent over the next 12 months.

PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION REPORT INTO AUSTRALIA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SYSTEM

The report found that a \$10 per day cap on childcare fees would result in 61,900 more children getting the benefits of early years education and 7,300 more parents entering the workforce.

The Productivity Commission has backed making three days a week of childcare and early learning accessible and affordable to any family who wants it.

Thrive by Five called on the government to guarantee access for all families and introduce a \$10 per day cap on out-of-pocket fees.

The average family with two children in early learning spends 16 per cent of their income on fees.

At the same time, many families struggle to find a place, with 24 per cent of Australia considered a '*childcare desert*', where there are at least three children for every available spot.

Childcare affordability and access challenges have led to Australia having some of the highest rates of women working part-time among comparable countries.

The Productivity Commission recommends the abolition of the activity test, which determines childcare subsidy eligibility based on how much parents work. The test has been found to disadvantage single mothers, First Nations families, and families on low incomes.

The Commission recommended new targets for service quality and an increase in the proportion of children who are developmentally on track.

THE ATTRACTION AND RETENTION PACKAGES FOR REGIONAL CHILD CARE WORKERS PROGRAM

The program provides grants to regional local government authorities to fund initiatives that support bringing in and keeping on early childhood educators.

The grant, available in the October round, offered up to \$250,000. \$781,066 has been allocated to 23 local governments since the grant's inception in 2021.

The Cook Labor Government committed \$1 million over four years in 2021 to support the attraction and retention of early childhood educators in regional areas.

Previous recipients have been:

- The City of Kalgoorlie-Boulder for the Goldfields Professional Development Project, delivered in partnership with the Shire of Coolgardie and the Shire of Leonora \$74,654.70.
- The Shire of Donnybrook Balingup so they can provide housing, support, training opportunities, and travel costs \$25,000.
- The Shire of Denmark to provide housing and travel subsidies for new and existing staff at Gumnuts Occasional Daycare \$25,000.
- The Shire of Wyndham East Kimberley provides subsidised housing and housing allowances \$20,798.05

NEW QUALIFICATION EXEMPTION FOR IN-HOME CARE EDUCATORS

The Federal Government approved an exemption to minimum qualification requirements for eligible in-home care educators working in remote and very remote areas.

This exemption, which came into effect in January 2025 is a permanent part of the in-home care program and recognizes the difficulty in attracting and retaining educators in these areas.

KATANNING EARLY CHILDHOOD HUB

The Shire of Katanning received a total of \$7.3 million to progress the Katanning Early Childhood Hub, to improve access to essential services for families.

The project consists of three integrated buildings: an early learning centre, a family centre, and child health offices.

The Katanning Early Childhood Hub is expected to provide the community with up to 67 long-daycare places, creating 28 jobs during construction and seven full-time positions once the project is complete.

The Hub is one of 24 priority projects under the Early Years Partnership (EYP), which is a collaboration between the State Government, Minderoo Foundation, The Kids Research Institute Australia, and the local community.

The EYP aims to improve the development, health, and learning of children aged 0 - 4 years old across four partnering communities.

THE EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES NATIONAL LAW APPLICATION BILL 2024

The bill is aimed at aligning Western Australia's education and care legislation with the rest of Australia to ensure stronger accountability for service providers and ongoing high-quality education and care services for children.

It comes after all Australian states and territories agreed to develop a National Quality Framework (NQF) in 2012, which introduced a new quality standard to improve education and care across long day care, family day care, kindergarten, and outside school hours care services.

The Bill will support a timelier application of modifications to the NQF, ensuring WA's early childhood and care legislation remains consistent with all Australian jurisdictions.

AUGUSTA CHILDCARE FACILITY

The State Government has committed \$550,000 towards establishing a childcare service in Augusta, with the transformation of a vacant state-owned building into a fit-for-purpose facility.

The project will provide the community with up to 30 childcare places and create between 8-10 local jobs.

Once completed, it is expected the new childcare service will help to attract and retain residents, as well as unlock the local workforce currently restricted by a lack of childcare options in the area.

PRESCHOOL REFORM AGREEMENT (PRA)

More than \$1.2 million in funding is being provided to WA's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector through the Preschool Reform Agreement (PRA), to develop and maintain quality preschool programs.

The Commonwealth funding will be distributed to the ECEC sector through the Supporting Children in Early Childhood Education and Care WA grants program administered by Child Australia.

In 2023, 16 organisations received over \$1 million in funding through the grant program towards boosting quality and access to kindergarten programs, which benefitted more than 5,700 children across the state.

Under the recent round that closed in August 2024, grants between \$20,000 to \$100,000 were available for organisations in both metropolitan and regional WA to deliver initiatives that develop and maintain quality preschool programs, promote enrolment and regular attendance, and prepare children for school.

Examples of the types of initiatives include providing parent support workshops, purchasing resource materials, and professional development for educators to deliver culturally appropriate programs.

The program is aligned with the PRA's objectives, with a key focus on enhancing preschool participation and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and developmentally vulnerable children.

REMOVAL OF CHILDCARE ACTIVITY TEST

The government has introduced legislation to remove the Childcare Subsidy Activity Test, which determines eligibility for government-subsidised childcare.

The Childcare Subsidy Activity Test will allow 126,000 children from low-income families to access early education and 40,000 parents to re-enter the workforce, injecting \$4.4. billion into the economy.

The Activity Test had been intended to encourage parents to work, but it had limited choices and made it harder for parents, especially single parents, to make an income.

Reforming or removing the Activity Test has been recommended by the Productivity Commission, Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, Business Council of Australia and dozens of other organisations.

ATTRACTION AND RETENTION GRANTS

Ten regional local governments will receive grant funding to attract and retain early childhood educators in regional Western Australia.

This is the fourth and final round of the Attraction and Retention Packages for the Regional Childcare Workers Program.

The funds are used for initiatives including training, relocation costs and travel allowances, as well as setting up traineeships and partnerships with local TAFEs to attract more early childhood workers.

Attraction and Retention Packages for Regional Childcare Workers Program 2025 recipients:

Shire of Boyup Brook	\$25,000
Shire of Perenjori	\$16,985.07
City of Kalgoorlie-Boulder	\$25,000
Shire of Collie	\$25,000
Shire of Esperance	\$49,799.93
Shire of Kent	\$12,000
Shire of Kulin	\$21,215
Shire of Gnowangerup	\$25,000
Shire of Wyndham-East Kimberley	\$25,000
Town of Port Hedland	\$25,000

EARLY DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING GRANTS

Fourteen Early Childhood Education and Care providers in WA have received funding through the Supporting Children in Early Childhood Education and Care WA grants program, which supports projects that foster early learning and development.

The funding through the Commonwealth and State Government partnership will be distributed to the WA Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector through the second round of the Supporting Children in Early Childhood Education and Care WA grants program administered by Child Australia.

The successful projects align with the PRA's objectives, focusing on improving participation and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and disadvantaged children.

NEW CHILDCARE CENTRE FOR DERBY

The Ngunga Group Women's Aboriginal Corporation has received funding to deliver the first phase of establishing an Early Learning and Family Centre in Derby.

Funding will deliver a project definition plan for the development of the centre, which will provide culturally secure early learning.

The centre is one of 24 priority projects funded through the Early Years Partnership, which is a collaboration between the State Government, Minderoo Foundation and The Kids Research Institute Australia.

The Early Years Partnership aims to improve the development, health and learning outcomes of children aged 0 - 4 years across its partner communities of Derby (including Mowanjum and Pandanus Park), Armadale West, Central Great Southern and Bidyadanga.

CHILDCARE EDUCATOR VACANCIES REPORT

Staff vacancies in the Early Childhood Educator sector are down 22 per cent following the government pay increase.

New data from Jobs and Skills Australia shows vacancies in the sector decreased by 22 per cent between December 2023 and December 2024.

RURAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS REPORT

Jane Cunningham – Portfolio Leader, March 2025

REGIONAL EDUCATION REVIEW AND STRATEGY

ICPA (WA) was thrilled with the Minister for Education's announcement at the 2024 ICPA (WA) Annual State Conference of the development of a Regional Education Strategy (RES). ICPA (WA) met with Doug Cook, Director of Education Wheatbelt and also lead on the RES in April and again in September to discuss the review. Doug and I had robust and productive discussions about regional education.

On 22 July 2024, the Minister released the RES draft for consultation. Belinda Hickman from the Countryman wrote an extensive piece for the Ripe magazine and included a lot of content from ICPA (WA) on the *Regional Education Strategy Draft* after our Publicity Officer, Chelsea Mott wrote and produced a press release. This was a great avenue to get the word out to members everywhere for people to review the strategy and make a submission. Over 110 submissions were received from across the state from parents, P & C's, school councils, government agencies, community, health, mental health and associations like us, including the YMCA and CWA.

ICPA (WA) submitted an extensive submission. Many points included in the submission were relevant to the Rural and Remote Schools, Specific Education, Student Accommodation and Travel Portfolio Policy's and motions that were previously presented at our State Conference.

ICPA (WA) was hopeful that the final RES report would be released by the end of 2024, but this was not to be. Prior to Christmas I checked in again with Doug Cook, who could report that many drafts had come and gone to the Minister. Unfortunately, it is yet to be released. We will now have to wait until after the upcoming election, and then I can assure you that ICPA (WA) will follow up with the Minister for Education, whoever it may be.

Information about the *Regional Education Strategy* can be found at the following link:

<https://www.education.wa.edu.au/regionaleducationstrategy>

PATHWAYS REVIEW CONTINUES

In 2024, following extensive consultation in 2023, the Minister for Education Hon. Dr Tony Buti released a blueprint to strengthen secondary school pathways so all students can fulfil their full potential through their post-school study, training or employment pursuits and be ready for the Western Australia of the future.

The Post-School Success Expert Panel Report: Consultation Draft reflected the extensive research and stakeholder engagement undertaken across the state by a panel of education experts, including principals and curriculum and assessment policy specialists, with support from a larger advisory committee representing key stakeholder groups.

Following the draft report release, ICPA (WA) once again made a submission and the final report was released on 11 November 2024.

This work will be completed concurrently with the refreshments to the Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) presently being considered by the School Curriculum and Standards Authority Board.

ICPA (WA) ACCESS TO AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION WIN

In late 2024, ICPA (WA) had an inquiry from a member. Her daughter had been offered a position at the WA College of Agriculture Denmark but was unable to be offered a boarding position at the College of Agriculture as they were at capacity. The family lives some distance away and the student would not be able to travel to Denmark every day, thus not able to accept this opportunity.

The student was already residing at the Albany Residential College, but they were told that it would not be possible to stay at the Albany Residential College and attend WA College of Agriculture Denmark even though there is a bus that runs each morning and afternoon for Denmark Agriculture College students to and from Albany. There were vacancies at the Residential College, and it seemed quite a logical solution for this student's access to appropriate education.

ICPA (WA) is pleased to say that after an email and a chat with Director of Agricultural Education, Doug Cook who was able to speak with relevant people at the Department of Education our member family quickly received clarification that 2025 'day' Denmark College of Agriculture students can stay at the Albany Residential College.

Many thanks to Doug Cook for quickly resolving our inquiry and continuing to assist with access to education for our RRR students.

WA STUDENT ASSISTANCE PAYMENT

In June 2024, Western Australian families with school-age children were able to apply for additional financial support with cost-of-living relief payments of \$250 for each secondary student and \$150 for primary and kindergarten students available to help with the extra costs associated with school.

RURAL AND REMOTE SCHOOL TEACHER SHORTAGE AND DIFFICULTIES CASE STUDIES

With many rural and remote schools experiencing teacher attraction and retention challenges, ICPA (WA) called for case studies to support their discussions with education stakeholders. The impacts of these stories on families and communities are heartbreaking. One such case study has been included in this report.

ICPA (WA) wrote to the Minister for Education and the Director General and also met regularly throughout the year to discuss these challenges.

Case Study – One example of a family's experience

*During 2023, my Son's Year 4, 5, 6 Class at ***** Primary School had six different teachers during Semester 1.*

The school year started with his regular teacher from 2022 (who was meant to be on Long Service Leave). That teacher took the class for Week 1.

Then the class had three separate teachers throughout the remainder of Term 1 and part of Term 2 that were from the Department of Education's Flying Squad (as it is called).

*These teachers did a teaching stint of two to four weeks each. At the completion of the Flying Squad staff, the class then had a relief teacher for a week in Term 2. Another relief teacher came on board during the last few weeks of Term 2, who thankfully continued on as the class teacher for the remainder of the year. This teacher however did job share for two days each week with another teacher. So therefore the 4,5,6 class at ***** Primary School had seven teachers taking the class throughout the 2023 school year.*

The impact that inconsistent teaching staff has on a student, class and the school is massive. Firstly, with so many relief staff there is very little consistency occurring with the teaching of the curriculum to the students, and very little learning by the students. There was also very poor communication between the teachers, school and parents. You would be communicating with one teacher about your child, and then another three weeks later you would have to communicate with a different teacher about your child and their progress within the classroom setting. There is also no routine within the classroom when you have so many relief teachers taking one class.

Students need a stable routine within the classroom. Having so many relief staff also lead to a lack of confidence in the school and the education system amongst parents. This can lead to students leaving the school to attend other schools that the parents feel may have more stable and consistent teaching staff, which has large ramifications on a small rural school and the level of education being provided at the school. When a student from a small rural school goes away to high school, they are already considered to be behind in their education compared to their metropolitan counterparts. This situation is exasperated when a small rural school has so many relief staff.

ICPA (WA) was pleased to hear the following that may help to attract teachers to our often-small RRR schools.

TEACHERS ENTERPRISE BARGAINING AGREEMENT ANNOUNCEMENT

On 5 July 2024 the Cook Labor Government confirmed significant investment in public education under a new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (Agreement) that will increase wages for public school teachers, address workload issues, enhance career pathways and attract more quality teachers to regional and remote areas.

Following negotiations with the State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia (SSTUWA) and Principals' Federation of Western Australia (PFWA), teachers and school leaders will receive a 12 per cent pay rise over three years and improvements to a range of conditions associated with leave, allowances and professional learning.

Support for classroom teachers will also be strengthened with small group tuition in 350 schools focusing on literacy and numeracy, allowing students to develop these fundamental skills.

To help students facing unique challenges that require extra support, 64 new complex behaviour management coordinators will also be introduced. These experts will work alongside classroom teachers to create tailored education programs to help students with disabilities and learning challenges, so every child receives the attention and resources they need to succeed.

The Agreement also includes new district allowances to attract and retain more teachers in remote and regional areas. This includes incentive payments to develop leaders in regional areas and attract accomplished teachers to those schools with the greatest need.

REGIONAL TEACHER AND LEADER MOBILITY TRIAL

ICPA (WA) welcomed the State Government announcement of workforce mobility trials.

The State Government announced the trial of two new initiatives to encourage metropolitan-based teachers and some administrators to work in regional schools across the state.

The workforce mobility trials will be available to permanent metropolitan teachers and aspiring school leaders to take a permanent position in a nominated regional school while maintaining a right to return to their city-based role after three years.

Teachers and some school administrators, who aspire to be principals can apply for principal positions in nominated regional schools when no suitable applicant has been found in the selection processes.

ICPA (WA) looks forward to seeing the results of these trails and hopes to see an expansion in 2025 for 2026.

SMALL SCHOOLS FUNDING ANNOUNCEMENT

Just prior to the start of the 2025 school year, it was announced that schools with fewer than 100 students (128 schools in total) would receive a funding boost.

The additional funding for small schools is part of the wider full and fair funding targets outlined in the Better Fairer Schools Agreement (BFSA), signed in 2024. Under the 10-year BFSA model, funding will be targeted to drive real improvements in the outcomes for Western Australia's public school students. BFSA is designed to support students from low socio-economic backgrounds, regional and remote students, students with disability and aboriginal students.

Schools in WA are funded via the student-centred funding model (SCFM), which includes an Enrolment-Linked Base (ELB) allocation to ensure that schools with smaller student populations can meet general operating costs. The additional injection of funds through the ELB works to ensure that schools are not disadvantaged due to their size.

From 2026, the additional investment will be doubled to an estimated \$10 million per year and provided to the schools on an ongoing basis.

SIDE TEACHING SUPPORT IN REGIONAL SCHOOLS

In early 2024, after continuing ICPA (WA) advocacy, the Minister for Education Hon. Dr Tony Buti, announced a trial to support teachers to address the challenges and demands associated with developing and delivering curriculum in classes with multi-age groupings.

On 19 August 2024, small schools from across the state were invited to attend an online meeting to hear the outline of a plan to teach science and maths in Years 5 and 6 via distance education through School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) in small cluster groups.

Schools invited included Cascades, Condingup, Lake King, Munglinup, Salmon Gums, Scaddan, Hyden, Kukerin, Newdegate, Nyabing, Binu, Chapman Valley, Eneabba, Leeman, Mingenew, Yuna, Useless Loop, Borden, Bremer Bay, Cranbrook, Kirup, Ongerup and Tambellup.

The trial began in Term 4, 2024 and I was excited to be teaching at Tambellup Primary School and experience Year 5/6 students attending an online science and technology lesson through SIDE. Tambellup has two classes,

the senior class having Years 2 - 6 in it. This is a great workload reduction strategy for the classroom teacher, and the children I saw participating were excited, engaged and meeting learning outcomes!

The trial has been expanded in 2025 with over 20 small schools involved and having science and/or maths delivered to groups via distance education.

SCHOOL OF SWIMMING AND WATER SAFETY ANNOUNCEMENT

In 2024, the Minister announced the new School of Swimming and Water Safety to further build our capability to deliver swimming and water safety programs to as many students as possible.

Peter Lilywhite has been appointed Principal, starting 3 March 2025. Peter brings more than 26 years experience with the Department of Education across city and country schools. A former PE teacher with a passion for sport and swimming, he also brings first-hand experience as a swimming instructor and coordinator of many water safety programs.

The School of Swimming and Water Safety will provide centrally coordinated programs and support for students across Western Australia. This new initiative will build on the established VacSwim and in-term swimming programs, with a focus on improving access to students who traditionally face participation barriers.

The specialist school will improve the recruitment and employment of swimming instructors and provide additional training to strengthen workforce skills and ensure a culturally responsive learning approach for students from all backgrounds and communities. It will also place a greater focus on aligning swimming and water safety programs with the health and physical education curriculum, integrating them with classroom practices and resources.

As Principal, Peter will lead the work to establish the new specialist school which is planned to be fully operational within two years. The existing in-term and VacSwim swimming and water safety programs will continue to operate as the Department work to establish the School of Swimming and Water Safety.

More than 220,000 school students have taken part in in-term swimming lessons during the 2024 school year, with at least 40,000 more enrolled to participate in VacSwim programs during the school holidays.

ICPA (WA) held many discussions with both the Minister for Education and Directors of the Department of Education regarding VacSwim and the challenges that many rural families had accessing the program after the announcements of the free VacSwim for Summer program. ICPA (WA) State Council have arranged a further meeting for June 2025 once the statistics from the summer have been analysed.

RELEASE OF FOCUS 2025

ICPA (WA) was buoyed by the release of the Focus 2025 earlier this term by the newly appointed Director General, Department of Education Jay Peckitt. The Focus 2025 outlines the support the Department of Education will provide to schools to enable *'every student to reach their full potential'*.

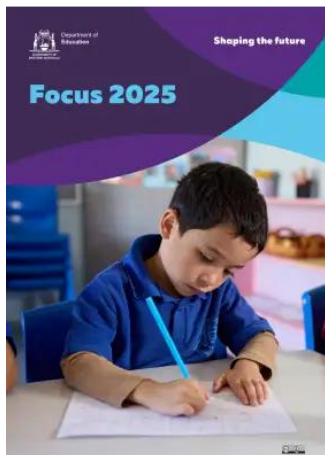
The key message, *'Every student in Western Australia deserves access to a high-quality education that equips them for success in an increasingly complex world'* is certainly what we expect for our rural, regional and remote students.

We are pleased to see many areas of our current advocacy included in the plan along with an increased number of statements specific to the 'regions.' Some notable mentions include:

- Find ways to increase our regional workforce.
- Work with government to review regional entitlements.
- Increase the opportunities for permanent metropolitan teachers and leaders to be seconded to regional schools.

- Implement a district allowance for regional teachers and school leaders.
- Provide targeted training for allied professionals and those in regional and central service.
- Provide every student with a pathway to a successful future by examining how we can expand opportunities for regional students.
- Explore methods and tools for parents and communities to raise and report concerns.

The following link will take you to the *Focus 2025* document: <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/strategic-directions>



DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AGENCY CAPABILITY REVIEW

The Department of Education (the agency) was reviewed under the Agency Capability Review Program from February to October 2024. ICPA (WA) was consulted as part of the review.

Many of the key observations were relevant to ICPA (WA), some of which closely relate to portfolio policy and motions raised at previous conferences.

Key observations:

- The agency is operating in one of the largest geographic education jurisdictions in the world. With growing community expectations of the role of schools, the agency continues to deliver a high standard of education across the state while navigating an increasingly complex operating environment.
- Agency staff are aware of and deeply committed to the purpose of educating children and young people. However, there is no longer term strategic plan to give direction to the workforce during times of change, to position the agency itself and its employees for the future. Without a clear and long term strategic direction, the agency risks operating in a reactive, incident management mode and be ill prepared for the challenges on its horizon.
- The agency's lack of future focus is hindering its strategic policy capability and impacting its understanding of long term policy requirements and its role in developing or responding to whole of government reforms. While the agency established a Strategic Policy Unit in 2020 to build its strategic policy capability and provide advice to senior decision makers on system wide issues, the unit has yet to fulfil its mandate.
- The agency has commissioned and invested significant resources in a number of reviews in recent years to strengthen its capability and capacity. However, because it has failed to embed many of the recommendations provided, it continues to encounter the challenges that these reviews were

intended to address. The agency needs to actively consider implementing recommendations from these past reviews, including the Statewide Services Form and Function Review and the Strategic Review of the WA Department of Education.

- It is critical for the agency to establish a clearer understanding of the role of central services in setting the strategic direction and supporting the system; the role of schools in providing a supportive and inclusive environment that promotes educational excellence and student wellbeing; and the role of teachers to support and provide education approaches and collaborate with others to address students holistic needs.
- The agency needs to adopt a system approach to delivering additional support to students in areas such as mental health and behaviour. Without appropriate allied professional support for students, teachers are navigating complex issues they have not been adequately trained to deal with. The lack of a system approach has resulted in schools developing their own solutions, particularly in regional WA, with services provided in an ad hoc manner in schools. A multidisciplinary approach is needed to support student learning and wellbeing to provide every student with a pathway to a successful future. This requires collaboration across agencies and with non-government service providers.
- The Independent Public Schools initiative introduced in 2009 was effective in ensuring schools had increased decision making responsibilities while remaining part of the system. However, the agency seems reluctant to make explicit its expectations of schools to the point where many believe they are autonomous from the system. There needs to be more balance between system leadership and the flexibility in decision making given to schools. This is to ensure the agency exercises its authority when required and provides greater formal direction in a targeted way to implement important strategic policy initiatives.
- Alongside greater flexibility in decision making at the local level are associated increases in administrative functions and paperwork. The agency would benefit from understanding where there are inefficiencies and duplications in functions and seek to centralise some of these processes. Backend processes around recruitment could be an early opportunity in this regard.
- The increasingly complex needs of students have expanded teacher workload and are resulting in high levels of stress and burnout, with attraction and retention affected. In the last three years, more than 5,200 teachers have left the agency. While workforce challenges are well documented, the agency has struggled to take a strategic approach to workforce planning. It needs to develop a whole of agency workforce strategy aligned to its future strategic direction. Workforce planning efforts should be informed by and help inform workforce planning occurring across the human services sector to facilitate adequate and appropriate supply pipelines.
- The particular workforce challenges faced by schools in regional WA are a longstanding problem. More effort is needed to build long term workforce capability in regional and remote WA with a priority to grow a workforce from the regions' local populations.
- Public sector agencies perceive a reluctance by the agency to engage proactively with them on significant policy matters and broader government priorities to support children and young people. The agency's reputation and achievement of outcomes are at risk if the entire system does not participate collaboratively to achieve agreed government priorities.
- School principals are requesting greater guidance, support, resources and tools to help them run their schools. There is a role for the agency to provide operational guides, templates and 'playbooks' to ensure the implementation of effective teaching strategies and efficient student services, and greater support to deliver effective business planning and leadership.

FAIRBRIDGE CAMP SCHOOLS

ICPA (WA) continues to advocate for better management, maintenance and pricing at the Fairbridge managed camp schools. This topic is always on the agenda when we meet with the Minister.

CAMP SUBSIDIES

On 15 December 2024, the government announced subsidies for camps.

“More than 560 WA public schools are expected to be eligible to apply for a discount on camps run by the Department of Local Government, Sport, and Cultural Industries (DLGSC) or the Department of Education (DoE), with funding to be targeted at WA public schools in areas with families who are more likely to be experiencing cost-of-living pressures.

Funding of \$1.5 million has been allocated to the DLGSC for the costs associated with its school camp subsidy program.

DLGSC manages five recreation camps, including four in greater Perth and one in Albany.

An additional \$896,000 will be provided for a similar fee waiver program for DoE camps. This includes the Broome Camp School, as well as the leased camp sites operated by Fairbridge Western Australia Inc. located in Point Peron, Geraldton, Dampier, Kalgoorlie, and Pemberton.

The discount will be applied to overnight accommodation charges and applicable program costs.

Eligible schools will book as normal, and the discount will be applied at the conclusion of the camp stay.

Schools with the lowest Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) will be eligible for the camp discount.

The discount will also be applied to eligible schools that have already made a booking.”

GENERATIVE AI THINK TANK

In Term 4 2024, State Councillor Sally Brindal attended a cross-sectorial Think Tank regarding the use of generative AI and digital opportunities for WA Education.

Sally found it highly informative and that the information would be valuable to share with our members. We look forward to Alex Jenkins, Director, WA Data Science Innovation Hub and Chair, Curtin AI in Research Group, presenting at the 2025 State Conference.

SPECIFIC EDUCATION REPORT

Jasmyn Allen – Portfolio Leader, March 2025

On 4 December 2023 the Minister for Education, Hon. Dr Tony Buti announced a review of the ‘School Education Act 1999’ to identify and review opportunities to strengthen access and inclusion for students with a disability. The WA based Education Act was written over 25 years ago and was identified as not fully meeting today's understanding and community expectations for students with a disability. The purpose of the review is to identify any barriers to access and inclusion within the Act and how it is applied to education in WA schools and make recommendations for change.

The review is now complete, the expert panel chaired by Professor Andrew Whitehouse provided the Minister for Education with a final report in December 2024. The consultation phase ran from 20 August to 4 October 2024 and involved:

- Over 30 consultations and information sessions with over 280 people
- Over 200 formal submissions
- Public face-to-face sessions in Perth and regional WA.

The review showed the following points relevant for our rural and remote students as barriers to access for education:

- Right to enrol
- Definition of a disability and clarity about what is included in this definition (e.g. Is ADHD included as a disability or not?)
- Students rights to teaching and learning adjustments
- The role and function of disability advisory panels and advocacy
- Restrictive practices
- Better alignment to the convention on the rights of a person with a disability.

The review also looked at how the Act relates to other state, national and international policies and how other states across Australia have learnt and implemented to improve access and inclusion for students with disabilities and health conditions. The review is the first step in the legislative change process and will result in recommendations being made to the Minister, which will then need a cabinet approval process before amendments to the Act can be introduced.

ICPA (WA) were consistent in their message throughout the consultation period that the needs of rural and remote students with a disability and or complex health care needs must be taken into account, especially considering limited access to health care and the variety of different ways our children access education (School of the Air, School of Distance Education, bus travel and boarding house residential care).

STUDENT ACCOMMODATION REPORT

Jasmyn Allen – Portfolio Leader, March 2025

In Western Australia, we have boarding schools in the private sector administered through Catholic Education West Australia (CEWA) (three Schools), Association of Independent Schools or Western Australia (AISWA) (23 Schools), and a couple of programs that offer a homestay-style boarding option both for domestic and international students.

The Department of Education has nine residential colleges and five WA Colleges of Agriculture with boarding facilities for Years 10, 11 and 12. ICPA (WA) research lists 41 secondary residential boarding facilities in WA for 2025, along with two additional organisations offering homestay-style boarding arrangements. Many schools that do not have a residential facility offer a dedicated staff member to act as a boarding liaison officer for students enrolled at their chosen school and attending either a WA Department of Education Residential College, Rotary Residential College in Perth or external homestay arrangements.

Our Western Australian residential boarding facilities are in high demand, with several reaching full capacity and a waiting list for future enrolments. Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA) data collection tells us that 93 per cent of students enrolled in boarding facilities are from regional, rural and remote WA, however, there is a growing trend of families wishing to board their children due to FIFO work schedules and employment opportunities both overseas and in remote WA.

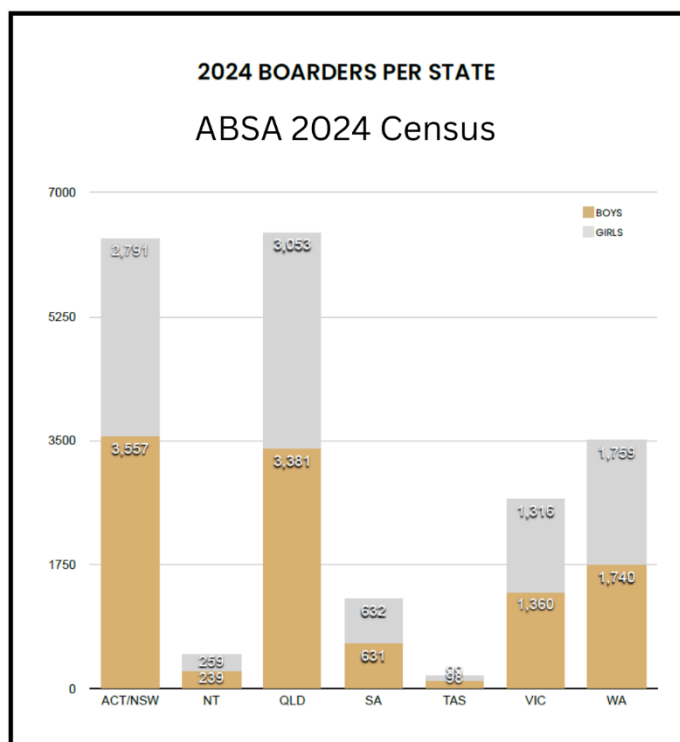
Enrolments in regionally based residential facilities are at an all-time high, with families opting to keep their children closer to home to stay connected and maintain strong family bonds.

Regional school offerings are strengthening, and this has seen an influx of families being able to have a choice of education locally. In other states across Australia, rural boarding in large centres in regional areas is very popular, with several boarding facilities per location. This may also be an emerging space in WA education as regional centres have shown significant growth in recent years.

ABSA 2024 census data tell us that WA has the third largest boarding population in Australia with 3,499 students. WA also have 702 staff working in boarding schools across our state.

Registration of a non-government (NGSR) school requires compliance with the WA Department of Education registration process and School Education Act 1999 along with other relevant policies and procedures.

Schools may be registered for between one to five years, with the length of registration based on compliance history and NGSR’s risk assessment history. The NGSR standards have recently been updated as of the 1 January 2024 and can be found here: <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/ngsr-guide>



Standard 8 provides requirements for boarding facilities and also makes reference to: “The policies and procedures should be benchmarked against contemporary best practice in protecting the safety and wellbeing of students in boarding facilities, as determined by a relevant peak body, such as the Boarding Standard for Australian schools and residences (AS 5725;2015) published in July 2015 by Standards Australia.”

ICPA (WA) would like our members to feel comfortable in understanding the policies and processes that sit alongside boarding and residential facilities as part of the professional manner in which boarding houses conduct themselves.

The Boarding Standard for Australian Schools and Residences is now 10 years old, and ABSA has recently announced a review of the standards. ICPA will have a seat at the table as part of the formal review process and we encourage our members to come forward with information regarding the standards and how they work across the boarding sector in WA.

Standard 8: Boarding

- 8.1** Supervisory staff employed in school boarding accommodation are competent, fit and proper persons, qualified to manage the care, welfare and needs of all boarding students.
- 8.2** The school maintains open and effective communication with the parents and guardians of boarders.
- 8.3** The boarders receive a well-balanced and nutritious diet.
- 8.4** The boarders are consulted on all matters affecting their accommodation, recreation, support services, code of conduct, safety and wellbeing.

Definitions**Supervisory staff**

For the purpose of standard 8.1, the supervisory staff are all those whose duties include the supervision of boarders at any time.

Note that boarding supervisors, like teachers and nurses, are now mandatory reporters. A "boarding supervisor" is "a person who holds an office or position at a boarding facility the duties of which include the supervision of children living at the facility" [*Children and Community Services Act 2004*¹⁶, s.124A].

Director General's considerations**Staff**

The Director General may check that supervisory staff qualifications, including first aid qualifications, are relevant to the direct care and development of students.

As to whether staff employed to supervise boarders are fit and proper persons, the term 'fit and proper', as with governing body members, is intended to give the widest possible discretion to the decision-maker. It covers both character and competence, enabling the decision-maker to take into account matters which can be fairly seen to be relevant to the role. A person with a history such as the following would not be considered a fit and proper person in this role:

- any conviction as an adult for any offence involving children and/or violence; or
- any criminal conviction for fraud or similar, e.g. stealing as a servant; or
- any finding of negligence or serious incompetence in a similar role.

A school's boarding staff recruitment policy should at least outline the offending history considered relevant to fitness and propriety, other checks to be made, qualifications and other matters considered to be relevant.

Professional learning for all staff within boarding facilities about the school's Code of Conduct and other child-safe policies and procedures is to be conducted annually. Boarding supervisors must also receive professional learning annually in their mandatory reporting obligations.

Policies and procedures

Policies and procedures must be in place for student boarding facilities which detail how a safe, healthy and supportive boarding environment for all enrolled boarders, including those with disabilities, is being

provided and maintained at all times. Students, parents and staff must be given a clear and comprehensive statement of these policies and support their implementation.

The policies and procedures should be benchmarked against contemporary best practice in protecting the safety and wellbeing of students in boarding facilities, as determined by a relevant peak body, such as the *Boarding Standard for Australian schools and residences* [AS 5725:2015] published in July 2015.

Communication with parents or guardians

Mechanisms for regular two-way communication with parents or guardians should be developed and maintained and take account of the different communication channels accessible to parents. The school should facilitate regular, private communication between the boarders and their parents/guardians.

Diet

Catering arrangements for students should be informed by relevant dietary guidelines approved by a peak body such as the National Health and Medical Research Council.

Consultation with boarders

For the purpose of standard 8.4, a satisfactory consultation with boarders will involve:

- informing the boarders about the overall process, including who else will be consulted, and its desired outcome;
- providing information relevant to the issue, which may include the limits of what outcome is possible, in accessible language;
- offering the boarders a choice of methods to communicate their individual and collective views, including where unanimity cannot be achieved; and
- giving due consideration to the opinions expressed.

Models of consultation may vary depending on the issue to be resolved. In some cases it will be appropriate to seek the views of a representative sample of boarders or from a boarders' council, particularly where the council members have been selected by the boarders themselves.

At the 2023 State Conference Midwest Branch presented a motion concerning the complex issue of support for students with a disability residing in boarding house facilities. The motion aimed to ensure students' needs are addressed effectively through the implementation of reasonable adjustments and accommodations with a provision of funding coming from the State Government to support these students.

At the 2024 State Conference Lakes District Branch presented a motion to prioritise increased support for staff and students in Residential Colleges with a focus on often hidden disabilities including Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), anxiety disorders and other mental health challenges.

Much of our work throughout 2024 in the Student Accommodation Portfolio has centred around ICPA State Council advocating for the needs of students in boarding facilities facing significant challenges over and beyond what is expected of a student in a secondary boarding facility. Submissions have been formally made to:

- School Education Act 1999
- Regional Education Strategy

Both of these reviews have strongly advocated for the needs of boarders in relation to the last two years of motions that have been presented to conference.

SCHOOL EDUCATION ACT REVIEW

On 4 December 2023, the Minister for Education, Hon. Dr Tony Buti MLA announced a review of the School Education Act 1999 (WA) to identify opportunities to strengthen access and inclusion for students with disability.

The consultation phase ran from 20 August to 4 October 2024 and involved:

- over 30 consultation and information sessions with over 280 people
- over 200 formal submissions – through either the online form, phone calls or emails
- public face-to-face sessions in Perth as well as regional WA.

The review is now complete. The Expert Panel and Advisory Council provided the Minister for Education with a final report in December 2024. A final report is yet to be released.

ICPA (WA), welcomed the opportunity to provide feedback on the Review of the School Education Act 1999 and to highlight the challenges that are unique to rural and remote students, to ensure effective support for these children in their education journey in Rural, Remote and Regional (RRR) Western Australia.

ICPA values align closely with Minister Buti's 'Message from the Minister':

"I believe every child and young person with a disability has the right to a quality education where they feel valued, included and supported to reach their full potential."

PRIORITY AREAS FOR ICPA (WA)

BOARDING AND RESIDENTIAL COLLEGES

Western Australia has students in both public residential colleges and in private boarding schools. For a variety of reasons, families may choose one or the other as a preferred option. In the private sector, the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA) and Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA) are prominent governing bodies of the majority of boarding houses attached to schools. To register their school, they need to complete registration with the WA Department of Education.

ENROLMENT

Students are still being turned away from education facilities because they have a disability, it is real, and it is happening in our state right now. The United Nations says *"Everyone has the right to education no matter who they are: regardless of race, gender or disability..."* The Disability Standards for Education 2005 (DSE) says *"The DSE seek to ensure that students with disability can access and participate in education on the same basis as students without disability."* And the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 makes it the law in Australia that children have the right to an education.

For children with a disability from our geographically isolated areas in WA, education involves School of the Air (SOTA), boarding and Residential Colleges, small rural public schools with less than 10 children in the whole school, large and small private schools, the rural school bus system as administered through the Public Transport Authority - School Bus Services (SBS) and a whole lot of support and nurture from families and carers. These systems are not consistent in how they go about enrolling a student with a disability and often the process of enrolment is tricky with huge requirements of paperwork, meetings, sourcing extra medical supportive documentation or further diagnosis.

ICPA (WA) advocates for achieving equitable access to an appropriate education for our families. School enrolments are difficult for our families with children with a diagnosis as it often involves a transition for the child due to school access (bus) or transition to high school (boarding). We represent a large demographic of families who live in very geographically remote locations; unfortunately, disability does not choose only those

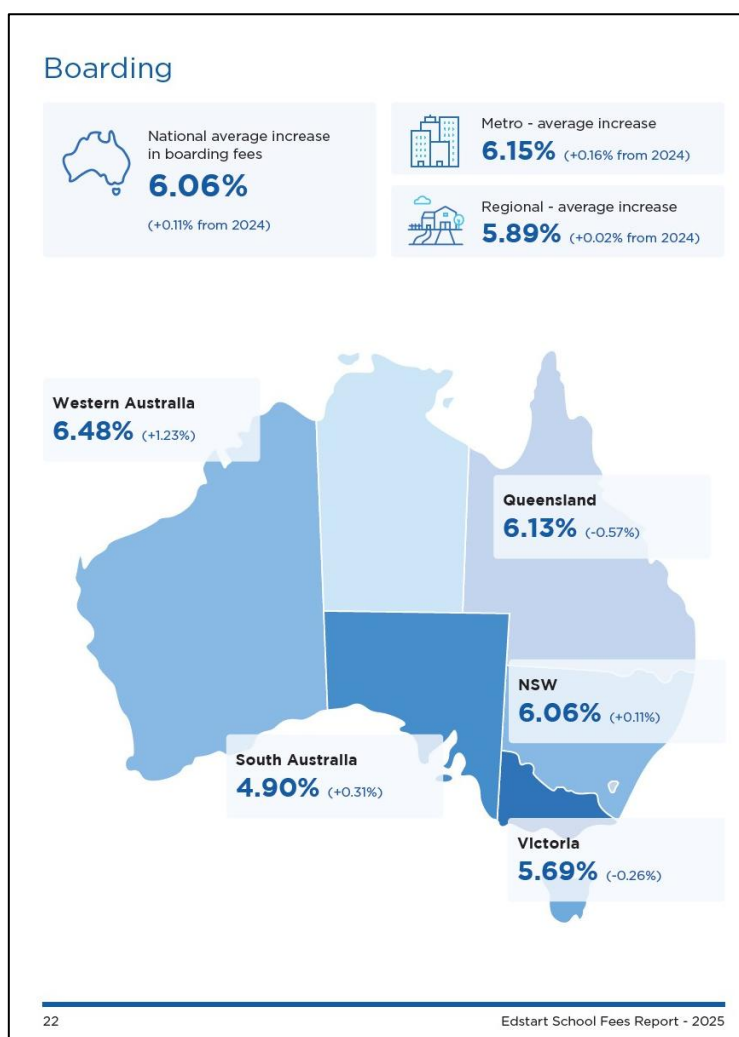
with good access to town and suitably provisioned educational facilities. Our families live 100's, if not 1000's of kilometres away from schools, and when our families put in an application for enrolment to a school, especially to cater for high school and boarding, to be turned away is devastating.

One of our families was told (*on application for high school with boarding*): "Come back again in a few years, she might have grown out of her development challenges by then, we will look at your application then..."

HEALTHCARE AND DIAGNOSIS

Members from State Council attended two sessions face-to-face with the independent review panel members. Honest conversation and case studies were shared around rural and remote students in boarding with diagnosed and undiagnosed conditions such as ADHD, anxiety and other physical and mental health challenges. We highlighted the complex needs of a child with these conditions and made recommendations around:

- Care plans being implemented into boarding facilities as a standardised planning mechanism (currently there is no requirement for this).
- Specialised training for staff members in mental health care.
- Ability for students to be able to return during the day to a residential facility for time out including flexible arrangements between school health staff and facility supervisors.
- Improved communication between school/parents and boarding facilities if a child has issues during a school day that might impact their presence back in boarding inclusive of a feedback system for parents.



TEACHER TRAINING REPORT

Jasmine Carmody – Portfolio Leader, March 2025

At the 2024 State Conference, one motion was received advocating for universities offering a Bachelor of Education to allow or encourage preservice teachers to gain experience as home tutors on stations as part of their practical placements.

Following this, a letter was sent to universities, reiterating the request for governing work to be endorsed or encouraged as part of practical placement. The letter also asked universities to consider recognising the credits earned through the Charles Darwin University program.

No responses have been received in relation to these letters; however, at the June face-to-face meeting Paul Mathews, Principal, School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) showed an interest in the model and was open to seeing if a pathway could be created with SIDE. An email was sent to Paul outlining what Charles Darwin University had implemented and following on from that email he attended the October face-to-face meeting.

Jim Bell (Deputy Director General), Douglas Cook (Director of Education Wheatbelt and Lead of Regional Education Strategy) and Paul Mathews (SIDE) attended a meeting with us together with Pam Moss (Director of Public Schools Planning), Stuart Percival (Assistant Executive Director, Service Delivery) and Jeff Brooks (Dean of Education at Curtin University).

Much was discussed including:

- Teacher Supply Challenges, the number of registered teachers who are not teaching in schools but are available for relief positions is very high and has been identified as an area for improvement.
- The reintroduction of the one-year Graduate Diploma program in 2024 and the positives this can achieve in improving teacher numbers.
- The proposal to establish outreach programs at university hubs e.g. Geraldton
- The most significant challenge identified for practicum placement of Diploma of Education students in rural areas has been the availability of affordable accommodation. Upon discussion of this issue ICPA (WA) recommended developing a partnership between the Department of Education and Universities to allow students to stay in residential colleges and/or camp schools. An option is to also include private boarding school facilities.

Following this meeting an email was sent to Pam Moss in November asking if she had made any progress with the option of Diploma of Education students using camp schools for accommodation when completing regional practicums. Pam stated that this would be on her agenda for 2025.

An email was also sent to Jeff Brooks to see if he had reached out to boarding houses or residential colleges to see if they could assist with accommodating Diploma of Education students.

No response has been received yet.

TEACHERS REGISTRATION BOARD OF WA (TRBWA)

In December 2023 the TRBWA re-defined the term educational venue as below:

“The term ‘educational venue’ will be replaced with ‘educational institution’ to recognise teaching can occur off-site or online.”

A letter was sent to TRBWA requesting clarification on whether, under the new definitions, home tutors can now use the home classroom to maintain their registration.

A response was received from TRBWA stating that ‘while the term ‘*educational institution*’ is now used rather than ‘*educational venue*,’ this list has not changed. The term ‘*educational institution*’ was introduced to better reflect that teaching may occur in connection with these venues but outside the classroom. In general terms, and in brief response to the enquiry, while the legislative amendments do afford greater flexibility to meet professional engagement requirements, that flexibility does not extend to considering the activity of teachers working as home tutors as meeting those requirements.

TERTIARY, TRADE AND TRAINING REPORT

Chandra Ridley – Portfolio Leader, March 2025

REGIONAL UNIVERSITY STUDY HUBS

In March 2024 the Hon Jason Clare MP, Minister for Education, announced 10 new Regional University Study Hubs. Two of these are in WA, one in Katanning and one in Tom Price/Onslow. These are additional to the ones already operational in Albany and Denmark.

The hubs offer support to students to work towards achieving a tertiary education without having to leave family, support networks and the local community. They are free for registered students to access 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Hub infrastructure includes study spaces, breakout areas, video conferencing, computer facilities and high-speed internet access. They also provide administrative and academic support services such as developing writing and research skills and managing administrative processes. There are also student support services such as pastoral support, study advice and help accessing student services.

The ultimate aim of the Regional Hubs is to enable students in rural, regional and remote Australia to access and complete higher education without having to leave their community.

Each hub reflects the community it serves and is established with the consideration of geographic location of the study hub in relation to the community, population size, demographic and cultural needs of the local community, local industry and businesses in the area and location of TAFE and VET providers.

CLEAN ENERGY SKILLS NATIONAL CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

The Commonwealth and State Governments announced in early June a joint investment of \$70.5 million over the next five years to establish a TAFE Clean Energy Skills National Centre of Excellence in Western Australia.

The Centre will operate across the WA TAFE network and be a skills leader in clean energy science, engineering, construction and operation supporting the net zero transformation.

It will equip students with practical skills and knowledge-based capabilities to support innovation in the clean energy sector. It will also partner with industry to drive skill development and support participation of more Western Australians in clean energy jobs.

It will expand access to clean energy skills training opportunities at TAFE campuses in metropolitan Perth and in regional areas including Kalgoorlie, Albany, Bunbury, Geraldton, Karratha and Broome.

There are a range of Career Conversation events being held around the state and online. They explore post-school options and career pathways. A link to register can be found at www.education.wa.edu.au and search career conversation events.

CURTIN REGIONAL ROAD TRIP

During Semester 2, Curtin University gave students the opportunity to undertake a Regional Road Trip Unit as part of their Regional Changemakers specialisation.

The unit is open to all undergraduate students. It gives students the opportunity to explore the role regional communities play in global sustainability. They will receive a unique insight into life and work in regional communities. This year students will be visiting towns across the Wheatbelt including Quairading and Corrigin.

The unit consists of four, three-hour workshops, a seven-day regional immersion and an overnight regional volunteer experience. The aim is for students to gain a deeper understanding of why regional, rural and remote Western Australia is pivotal to all our futures.

SKILLS WEST EXPO

The 2024 Skills West Expo was held on 25 - 27 July at the Perth Convention Centre. Over 160 organisations and employers participated in the three-day event.

This was an opportunity for people to engage directly with educators, course providers and employers to explore tailored career pathways.

There was also a 'Try-a Skill' zone with activities such as driving autonomous trucks in mining scenarios, pedal powered car races, virtual cybercrime investigations and creative jewellery workshops.

TERTIARY ACCESS PAYMENT

Applications for 2023 school leavers close on 31 December 2024.

Applications for 2024 school leavers open on 1 January 2025.

In the 2024-25 Mid-Year Economic Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO), the government announced it is removing the TAP eligibility requirement to commence tertiary studies within 12 months of completing Year 12. All other criteria remain in place, including the student being up to 22 years of age at the time of commencement of the course. Removing the access limit period will ensure more regional students are incentivised to pursue a tertiary education and can benefit from this cost-of-living support. This will enable more students to access the TAP and responds to feedback from regional stakeholders and the Accord Panel.

The changes to TAP eligibility require updates to the application and supporting systems. The government is working to make these changes to enable first-year students who have taken one or more gap years following Year 12 (or equivalent) and are aged up to 22 to apply for the TAP.

Students who have taken a gap year are eligible from 1 January 2025, however they cannot apply until mid-June 2025 through [Services Australia](#) as the system needs to be updated.

NEW DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE DEPARTMENT OF TRAINING AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

In November 2024 Jodie Wallace was appointed to the position of Director General of the Department of Training and Workforce Development. Ms Wallace has worked in the Public Sector for more than two decades and has held Executive Director positions at the Department of Training and Workforce Development for the last six years. Ms Wallace's priorities will include continuing to deliver a high standard of service to the WA Community and provide accessible world-class training.

HIGHER TAFE ENROLMENTS

It was announced in November that the government investment in TAFE's has seen Central Regional TAFE achieve higher enrolments in automotive retail, service and repair courses in Kalgoorlie following the opening of a new state-of-the-art heavy trades and engineering workshops.

Enrolments were up more than 69 per cent in 2024 compared to the start of 2020.

The State Government announced an \$8 million top up for TAFE in the 2024-2025 State Budget to continue to meet high demand for the Fee Free initiative.

NEW LOOK JOBS AND SKILLS WEBSITE

A new look Jobs and Skills website was launched in December 2024. Improvements have been made to the course list and occupation profiles to make it easier to find information, support and services.

CHANGES TO STUDY AND TRAINING LOANS

In December there was an indexation rate change for study and training loans which will now be based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI) or Wage Price Index (WPI) – whichever is lower. The change is backdated to indexation applied from 1 June 2023.

The government has proposed changes for study and training loans. The changes will take effect from 1 July 2025 subject to the passage of legislation.

The minimum repayment threshold will change from \$54,435 in 2024-2025 to \$67,000 in 2025-2026.

HELP repayments will only be calculated on the income above the new \$67,000 threshold instead of the total annual income.

APPRENTICE INCENTIVE PAYMENTS

On the 24 January 2025, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced a \$10,000 incentive payment to encourage apprentices to complete their training in the residential housing sector. From July 1 2025, eligible apprentices will receive \$10,000 in incentive payments over the life of their apprenticeship to work in housing construction.

Apprentices will receive \$2,000 at 6, 12, 24,36 months and at the completion of their apprenticeship.

TRAVEL REPORT

Arlene Sutherland – Portfolio Leader, March 2025

As the song goes *“The wheels on the bus go round and round or do they”?*... Sometimes they do not. During 2024 the Travel Portfolio once again focused on the challenges encountered by rural and remote students accessing education, including bus runs being terminated within two weeks of them starting and, sadly, it not being communicated well enough to the families and bus contractors!

At the preceding 2024 State Conference, five motions were presented addressing a range of issues. The Lakes District Branch presented four motions, including one advocating for an increase to the payment rate per kilometre for the Public Transport Authority (PTA) conveyance allowance to align with the business expense rate of 85 cents per kilometre by the Australian Tax Office (ATO).

ICPA (WA) appreciates the increase to the allowance in early 2024, which saw an increase of 26.20 cents per kilometre (25.24 cents per kilometre up to 55.6 cents per kilometre), which was well received as this was the most significant increase in almost 22 years! However, this allowance is still one-third less than the ATO rate of 85 cents per kilometre. ICPA (WA) will continue to advocate for an ever-hopeful increase and to match payment to the ATO.

The Meekatharra Air Branch presented a motion that parents receive a conveyance allowance for driving their children to Distance Education (DE) and School of the Air (SOTA) camps.

During October 2024 face-to-face meetings in Perth a State Council delegation convened with Ms Olivia Crowley, Chief of Staff and her colleague at the office of Hon. Minister Saffioti. The discussion highlighted the challenges faced by geographically isolated families, particularly the importance of School of the Air camps, which are an integral part of their education. Some families may need to attend these camps three or four times a year, with each camp lasting a week.

For one of our families, the mother works on the station and has to take one week off work then drives 650 kilometres each way, a total of 1300 kilometres to attend, with no financial assistance. When we suggested a conveyance allowance for these school camps the response given to ICPA (WA) delegates from the Ministers office was one of surprise that there was no such allowance for these educational camps. ICPA (WA) will continue to gather details of just how many families are affected by this allowance gap in the system!

Correspondence was sent to address this issue, and we were grateful to receive a letter from the Executive Director of TransPerth System, Regional Town and School Bus Services (PTA) addressing our suggestion. Unfortunately, we were advised that the Student Transport Assistance Policy (STAP) states there is no provision for students attending school camps, which is frustrating as the wording of camp may have been misinterpreted. They recommended we take this matter directly to the Department of Education.

ICPA (WA) will continue the advocacy for this allowance to be made available to these isolated families going to educational school 'camp'... no tents/camping involved!

Lakes District Branch put forward a motion to advocate the Department of Transport to review their policy and criteria regarding the Student Travel Subsidy Scheme (STSS) Road Travel Subsidy (RTS) and increase eligibility for rural families.

A letter was written to the Hon. Minister Saffioti, Minister for Transport highlighting many examples of families who have been deemed ineligible due to the complicated criteria with the transport hubs and the timetabling of buses i.e. there is a bus stop in the town but it will come through twice a week and then the student would have to change buses and some cases take two days to make a four hour trip.

ICPA (WA) was grateful to receive communication from the Manager On-Demand Transport Customer Service, Mr Richard Roberts, where we discussed the matters raised by ICPA (WA). The Department of Transport acknowledged that the eligibility criteria for the Road Travel Subsidy have historically been strictly applied, particularly in relation to timetabled bus services, regardless of the frequency of the service.

Previous approaches from ICPA (WA) have highlighted this aspect of the subsidy, which has prompted a commonsense application of the eligibility criteria by the Department over the last 18 months. Factors such as the age and safety of the student, frequency of the bus transport and any other extenuating circumstances are now considered before a decision is made on a subsidy application. This is a great move forward.

The Department informed ICPA (WA) that rejected applications for the subsidy in the examples we provided have resulted in the approval of the subsidy. In the last year, applications declined by the Department have been for trips that have been outside the two-week school term/semester dates requirement, exceeded the allowed trips per year or where incomplete paperwork has been submitted.

In our letter, ICPA (WA) also pointed out to the Department of Transport about differences between rural and metropolitan areas, in that the metropolitan areas have Smartrider cards (students travel for free for the year) as to why this could not be rolled out to rural and remote travel subsidies and not be conditional.

NOTE: As of February 2025, the Free Travel with Student Smartrider is again available for all metropolitan students)

The Department of Transport contacted the Public Transport Authority to ask this question, and they were advised that free transport to school is generally available to all students across the state. The only exception

being if rural and remote students do not have access to a school bus service, in which case these students are eligible for a conveyance allowance....but as ICPA (WA) have found, you must meet the criteria!

One of the issues we hear a lot from our members is the communication and notice given for changes to bus schedules, even terminations! Hence two of the motions put forward at the 2024 State Conference were requesting that School Bus Services (SBS) ensure that families and bus contractors receive a minimum of two (2) weeks advance notice in the event of any alterations or cancellations to a school bus route.

This unfortunately does not always happen which also brought another motion put forward requesting that ICPA (WA) advocates the Minister for Transport and the Department of Transport to provide additional staffing, training or restructuring of the School Bus Services (SBS) division to support regional and rural families to ensure open, collaborative and timely communications in determining school bus routes.

ICPA (WA) received correspondence from the Public Transport Authority (PTA) and referred them to the following: They informed ICPA (WA) that the Minister for Transport asked the Legislative Assembly to refer the current Student Transport Assistance Policy (STAP) framework to the Public Accounts Committee for review and following an extensive consultation they tabled their report 'Bus Fair' on 18 August 2022 which included the following recommendation.

Recommendation 35:

"That the Minister for Transport should ensure the Public Transport Authority supports School Bus Services staff to improve their communication with school bus contractors through the development of a communications protocol with clear response and resolution guidelines. School Bus Services should be sufficiently resourced to ensure staff have the time to consult and communicate well".

The PTA, as part of implementing Recommendation 35 has commenced the creation of a new planning and contract support section within School Bus Services to undertake reviews of school bus networks to ensure they are effective and efficient, with a longer-term planning strategy to meet customer needs both now and into the future. In addition, the PTA has published additional information on its website to provide guidance on establishing community School Bus Advisory Committees linked to their local schools to help with information dissemination.

The PTA also said while the above changes will bring better planning and communication outcomes, it is envisaged that there will always be a period of uncertainty for student placements and short notification periods to affected families for bus route changes to accommodate new applications. This is primarily due to the considerable number of last minute or late applications that are received for transport assistance which can also result in the removal of complimentary students from a service at short notice in favour of an eligible student, where the bus has seating capacity issues.

Unfortunately for some of our families, the above has not come to fruition as a family in Lake King contacted ICPA (WA) with a bus problem. Basically. The family started their first term in 2025, only for the bus to be terminated after two weeks and no notice was given to the families or the contractor. ICPA (WA) again have contacted School Bus Services to see what can be done about this situation as the impact of no bus means the families trying to drive their children to school and also the other issue of the possibility of not being able to attend the local primary school full stop, resulting in the numbers declining at that school.

During our face-to-face meetings in February 2025, our State Councillors met with Mr. Anthony Cattai, Operations Manager with School Bus Services (SBS). We were able to have a productive discussion about the School Bus Advisory Committees (SBAC) and the importance of having them and local knowledge on the 'ground.' The SBAC link has been firmly inserted into the SBS policy for all bus users to see and use; we discussed the best way to encourage families to make sure within their school communities, Parents and Citizens groups to ensure they have registered. Our council suggested that within our advertising and reach

on social media, ICPA (WA) grab the attention of our Bus Committees and encourage them to register and we hope that SBS will fully utilise the knowledge that these committees have.

ICPA (WA) also discussed with Mr. Cattai another issue for a family who live 120 kilometers from Esperance and has four children, two of whom attend Esperance Senior High School (ESHS) and the two other children attend Condingup Primary school. The family are trying to get the bus closer to the gateway so that they can ensure that the two older children can get onto the bus for Esperance Senior High School and then the parents can make it back in time to their home to get the younger two children on their bus to Condingup Primary School. At the moment it is proving almost impossible due to the distances they are having to drive to get these children on the bus.

The family contacted ICPA (WA) with their problem and asked if we could assist. ICPA (WA) have been in communication with School Bus Services, have spoken with the bus contractor and also local government representatives in Esperance. We are still hoping that School Bus Services can offer a better solution for the family to make their daily lives more functional and productive. At the moment the family are under a lot of pressure just trying to get their children to be able to receive basic education. ICPA (WA) hope that there will be a positive outcome soon. School Bus Services have been very communicative with regards to this situation.

One point that became clear during this discussion is that when using Google Maps to view bus routes, which are accessible to anyone with a computer or phone, some of the route mappings are inaccurate due to road numbers not being marked on certain roads. For example, the family in Esperance encountered this issue. ICPA (WA) found, through consultation with the family, that Apple Maps provided more consistent results.

In the last 12 months ICPA (WA) have also had some other bus situations which we are grateful to say have worked out well from all the hard work by families, ICPA (WA), Public Transport Authority (PTA) and School Bus Services (SBS).

One such situation;

A family were given the grim news of no bus for their son heading into Year 6 in 2025, and then informed the mum (let us not forget it generally falls to the remit of the mum!) that they would need to spend the day driving approximately 2 hours to get their older children to high school and then repeat getting your younger child to primary school, and then doing the same in the afternoon!

The family reached out to ICPA (WA) with their plight and sent a very comprehensive breakdown of their bus situation. On reading the information the suggested solution made perfect sense, but alas School Bus Services (SBS) and the Public Transport Authority (PTA) did not completely agree. ICPA (WA) wrote a letter to School Bus Services advocating for a change to this decision.

During our face-to-face meeting in October 2024 with Ms Olivia Crowley, Chief of Staff, office of Minister Saffioti, we discussed the Yuna bus situation.

One of our State Councillors who attended the meeting is from the Yuna community and had firsthand knowledge of the area/roads/logistics of what SBS were actually asking of this family and also of the proposed solution. The Ministers office took the information on board and our councillor was able to point out to them on the map what was a good road and not such a good a road; we were asked to send another letter with further information and the Ministers office would take another look. Further to this meeting, the story was captured by GWN news, various radio stations and also social media platforms. The result after much work by many bodies including the Yuna community, the bus thankfully was reinstated for this child to be able to attend his local primary school and be able to complete his Year 6 schooling with his peers. A very happy ending...

Additionally at the same time, the Kondinin community were also granted reinstatement of their bus service after an absence of 10 years.

But wait there is more. A small school way down on the south coast at Gairdner Primary School, sadly a school with falling numbers, has resulted in the remaining students and their families deciding they would have to move schools, a very heartbreaking decision. One family moved their children to Jerramungup (decision purely on accessing a bus), the other family decided to go to Bremer Bay Primary as they were south of Gairdner so was the obvious choice.

However, when applying for bus transport to Bremer Bay Primary they were told initially they would have to meet the bus at a junction 13 kilometres away, the problem with this was the road was not really a suitable road to be driving on a daily basis; hence the family were then told they could meet a bus at a junction 23 kilometres from their home, the family live 24 kilometres from Bremer Bay Primary so hence the family were left with travelling to and from school every day in their own vehicle 96 kilometres.

The family got in touch with ICPA (WA) and a letter was written to School Bus Services (SBS) ICPA (WA) advocated for this decision to be looked at again and to please look at another option to get this family access to education. The family had got to the stage as many families do when they have a bus crisis that they were actually not sure how their children were going to access education.

ICPA (WA) can thankfully report that SBS and PTA looked at the situation and were able to provide a bus for this family that would collect them at the gate and take them to Bremer Bay Primary.

ICPA (WA) appreciate the communication and meetings we have been able to have with SBS and the PTA. We look forward to the continued support from these governing bodies and endeavour to help each other and forever empowering that our country students education matters as long as ***'the wheels on the bus do indeed keep going round and round...'***

RURAL AND REMOTE EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL (RREAC) REPORT

Naomi Obst – Appointee, March 2025

ROLE OF RREAC

Established in early 1997, the Rural and Remote Education Advisory Council (RREAC) provides the Minister responsible for the education portfolio with evidence-based and solutions-focused strategic advice on education and training issues and developments in rural and remote areas of Western Australia.

The ongoing provision of quality education and training to rural and remote Western Australia is dependent on the Minister receiving sound strategic advice. RREAC fulfils a significant role in providing this advice and reports directly to the Minister. It performs a unique role with regards to rural and remote education.



95,576
students enrolled at regional schools in WA as of Semester 1 2024

68,948
students enrolled at public schools

26,628
students were enrolled at non-government schools



401
Schools in regional Western Australia

305
public schools

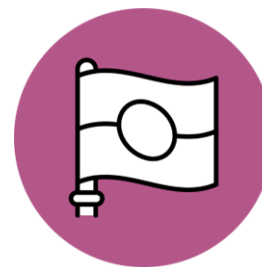
96
non-government schools



425
WA students attend a Department of Education residential college

307
students attend public schools

118
students attend non-government schools



17,935
Aboriginal students attend regional-based schools

14,884
students enrolled at public schools

3,051
students enrolled at non-government schools

REPRESENTATIVES

Groups represented in Council may change from time to time according to appointments made by the Minister. Members use their experience, skills, and qualifications to provide strategic advice to the Minister from a cross-sectoral perspective. The Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson also meet with the Minister on a regular basis. The Minister for Education appoints the members of RREAC with the endorsement of Cabinet.

Community and Consumer Representatives

- Isolated Children's' Parents' Association (WA) Inc
- Western Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc
- Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia – parent representative
- Community representative for education
- State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia and Independent Union of Australia WA Branch
- Catholic School Parents WA

Funder and Provider Representatives

- Catholic Education Western Australia
- Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia
- Western Australian universities
- Department of Education
- Education and training interests
- Aboriginal education and training interests
- Regional Chambers of Commerce and Industry (WA)

(Reference : RREAC webpage)

ICPA'S ROLE IN RREAC IN 2024

As per RREAC's charter, five meetings were held including a regional visit to Geraldton and a visit to Parliament House to meet with the Minister for Education, Hon. Dr Tony Buti MLA.

Unfortunately, the regional visit to Geraldton was held at the same time as our Federal Conference in Sydney so I was unable to attend.

REGIONAL VISIT FOCUS

The focus of the 2024 RREAC, regional visit to Geraldton was in the area of access to post-secondary training and higher education for regional and remote students, which provide pathways to emerging careers, jobs, and industries.

Site visits were arranged as well as a '*community forum*' to provide the Council with a sufficiently broad yet focused cross section to capture the accomplishments and challenges in the Geraldton region.

A report is being compiled and will be available to the public upon completion.

The regional visit in 2023 was in Albany- also at the same time as our Federal Conference - the final report can be found below.

<https://www.education.wa.edu.au/dl/p18zpzx>

PARLIAMENT HOUSE

The meeting at Parliament House was an opportunity to meet with the Minister for Education to discuss the ongoing role of RREAC. It was agreed that it forms an important link between the Minister and the Western Australian rural community, and it is an organisation that I believe ICPA should be represented on.

At this meeting, the newly announced pilot program for small regional schools to provide online access to Maths and Science teachers at SIDE was discussed. It was emphasised that a face-to-face teacher would always be the preferred option, and this was a measure to provide support to teachers who are teaching multi-aged classes.



SUBMISSIONS

RREAC participated in the process to provide feedback to the Minister on the Regional Education Strategy Draft. Comment was made on all Pillars within the strategy. A date for further consultation on the Strategy Draft is unknown at the time of writing this report.

YUNA SCHOOL BUS

At the Parliamentary meeting visit I was prepared to raise the Yuna School Bus proposed closure with the Minister and with the information pack prepared by Fiona Mann and the Yuna School Bus Advisory Committee the required information available. Unfortunately, despite accepting an invitation for lunch and sitting through question time, the opportunity for a one-on-one discussion with the Minister was not possible. The Yuna community should be proud of the determined and professional way they have run the “Save the Yuna School Bus” Campaign.

Correspondence from our October meeting had a reply from the RREAC Chair to Fiona Mann, thanking her for her letter, but ultimately passing the responsibility back to the Minister for Transport. I raised a concern with the board that RREAC, by its very nature, exists to provide advice to the Minister for Education, and whilst they can argue that this is a transport issue, it is also very much an educational access issue. There are recommendations in the Bus Fair Report that the Ministers for Education and Transport should work together to solve issues that go across both portfolios.

The Yuna community has historically been a community that has access to a local rural school and is not in a traditional SOTA catchment area. There is a very real and growing concern that rural areas along our Northern Eastern Wheatbelt are losing their bus services and will in time also lose numbers in their rural school, which will in turn force the closure of small rural schools.

There was unified support from the RREAC council for the Yuna Bus Run and the precedent that it sets. Rather than just have it minuted, it was suggested that the chair of RREAC write a letter to the Minister’s concerned as a “Statement of Disappointment” to the recent decision to cease the operation of the Yuna Southeast Bus Service.

There were several supportive comments from other RREAC members, including a similar situation in Munglinup. The representatives from the Department of Education were both aware of the situation and commented that the Department of Transport were holding firm on their decision.

If there is any positive out of this decision, it is that our ability as an organisation to have our concerns heard is working and reaching the right people. It is just in this case we have a Minister that will not budge – yet.

Aside from the formal meetings the opportunity to discuss rural education with other stakeholders is an important aspect of ICPA belonging to such a group.

On 7 November 2024, the government announced in parliament that a 12-month extension would be granted to the Yuna community for a bus service. In addition to the Yuna bus service extension, the community of Kondinin also had its bus run reinstated after a 10-year absence. ICPA and Yuna Community members were present in parliament to witness this announcement.

Thank you for the opportunity to represent ICPA (WA) on the RREAC board for 2024.