
Health and Wellbeing – COVID-19 Report

Madame President, distinguished guests, fellow members of ICPA, ladies and gentlemen
It is with great pleasure that I present the Health and Wellbeing – COVID-19 report.

How fantastic it is to be here celebrating 50 years of ICPA-NSW, “50 years on, 50 years strong”. After 2 years of cancelled events, countless online meetings including 2 Deputations and such a deviation from the norm, it feels so great to be here together, face to face for such a significant milestone.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many challenges to boarding since its commencement and 2021 has been no exception.

ICPA-NSW families with children boarding interstate were given somewhat of a reprieve for the first few months of the school year and then once again faced border closure issues, particularly those attending schools in South Australia, Queensland and Victoria.

ICPA-NSW renewed its advocacy for interstate boarders, with their mental health and access to not only their education but also their homes and families as major concerns. Once again, we came up against State governments that showed little empathy nor understanding, regarding the effects of border closures on the wellbeing of interstate boarding students.

Countless letters were written and phone calls made, in attempt to get State governments to understand that our interstate boarders from rural and remote areas posed little threat of bringing covid across borders and needed to be recognised amongst the ‘Essential Travellers’ traversing our nation.

In July 2021, ICPA-NSW surveyed their members, namely with boarding students asked to urgently gather information. There were 205 responses and we were able to ascertain the location of families, whether they were in a border bubble / zone, information about the schooling status of their children and any issues that border closures were causing. The data collected, allowed us to see that some children had been required to quarantine several times since the beginning of the pandemic, undertake long periods of remote learning and unreliable internet. The survey also confirmed our concerns that the ongoing border closures and uncertainty were causing immeasurable anxiety and other mental health issues. These were also heightened as children were unable to return or see their families for months at a time.

89% of respondents lived remotely and 54% of these were able to guarantee that their children could return home and be completely isolated from community transmission.

For NSW families with children boarding in South Australia, fears were realised in late June, when the NSW / SA border was closed once again. Parents were faced with the difficult task of getting their children home and wondering if it was best for them to stay in South Australia in case they

were required to quarantine if they left the state. Luckily, many members lived in the 'instated' border bubble and were granted exemptions, but not everyone was so lucky.

One Year 12 student made a mad dash from Orange to the South Australian border and had to sleep in their car overnight. Another two families fought for over a week before the South Australian Government granted them an exemption. ICPA-NSW explored all possible avenues including the regular communication with the NSW Cross Border Commissioner and South Australian Ombudsman.

Families with children boarding in Victoria, not only had to deal with border closures in 2021 but continuous long periods of remote learning due to reoccurring lockdowns and harsh restrictions. Some students completing around 200 days in 2020 and 2021. This had a significant effect on their learning outcomes, social wellbeing and added unnecessary stress for families amidst a global pandemic.

During these periods, some interstate boarders had to stay at school to complete remote learning due to border closures and others were stuck at home unable to return when school resumed. In July, ICPA-NSW fought to have a rule overturned which stated that when NSW children from NSW/VIC cross border returned to their boarding houses, they were not allowed in the community for 14 days. Common sense prevailed and these children who posed little to no risk, were not segregated from the rest of their schools. The overturning of a ruling that the CHO and Premier signed off on does not happen lightly. This highlights the power of the connections and relationships that ICPA-NSW has, for them to make a little mark with the bureaucrats and Ministers in Victoria. The ICPA-NSW survey data proved invaluable, as it was passed onto the Victorian government to show locations of the affected children and how little threat they posed to bringing COVID-19 into their schools.

When NSW schools moved to remote learning in August. Victorian students boarding at Yanco Agricultural High School found themselves homeless when their school closed. They were not able to travel back to their homes due to border closures. The only way that these 6 students, one only 14 years old, could return to Victoria, was if they completed hotel quarantine in Melbourne. Each child could have completed home quarantine on their rural properties with daily police checks and required testing, but their commonsense requests were denied by Victorian Authorities, despite exhausting all avenues extensively, with absolutely no compassion for these vulnerable adolescents with no home to go to.

To quote the NSW Minister for Education and Early Childhood, Sarah Mitchell, ***"This is not an impossible task, we have been trying to find a solution with the Victorian government and I call on them to come to the table to find a resolution for these students"***.

There was indeed a very possible, risk averse solution, but unfortunately a resolution was never found, despite numerous attempts by ICPA-NSW to contact relevant authorities and some families were forced to complete 14 days hotel quarantine in Melbourne. This was an extremely dark day, how did Australia become so divided and allow this kind of deplorable treatment.

With many 100s of New South Wales children who board in Queensland also faced endless issues with border closures throughout 2021, fellow State councillor and current President, Kate Warby, made incredible headway with the Queensland government. After continuous phone calls and

emails across many areas within departments, Kate on behalf of ICPA-NSW was invited by Queensland Health to a seat at many stakeholder meetings and in turn provide important feedback to QLD Health – something we had failed to achieve in other states, where our attempts at communication were often ignored.

Having reliable contacts within the Queensland Health Authority, allowed ICPA-NSW to provide up to date and correct information to our members and help individuals with concerns, rather than attempt to ring QLD COVID-19 hotlines along with 1000s of other people affected by the endless issues that border closures were creating.

The sheer number of helpless families meant that ICPA-NSW were often inundated with families desperate for answers and needing assurance that they would be able to have access to their children in QLD. There definitely wasn't always favourable outcomes though, as the Queensland government remained steadfast on protecting its state from the worsening COVID-19 situation in NSW.

A private Facebook group that was set up for members, proved invaluable in providing up to date information on the Queensland border and feeding relevant advice to parents.

In late August, the Queensland government released a Class Exemption for interstate boarding students with families in the 'Non Restricted Border Zone'. The rules were strict, however, it was great that we finally had a pathway for those children boarding in QLD!

The Class Exemption saw families in the 'Non Restricted Border Zone' given commonsense access to their boarding children in Queensland, but those families outside of this area were left in despair. All the while, ICPA-NSW continued to lobby relevant Queensland government departments, our message remained the same, our members needed a clear and consistent approach for interstate boarders to cross borders and access education and their families. To quote New South Wales Senator Perin Davey, who was instrumental in her continued supported for our children "We shouldn't be talking about this 12 months on".

Media once again featured heavily in ICPA-NSW's advocacy for #nobordersforboarders. State Councillors and our members did countless TV and radio interviews, featured in news articles across NSW, QLD, VIC and SA. The Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA) also collected stories from hundreds of affected families across Australia and provided these to Senator Bridget McKenzie's office. A big thank you must be extended to those families that were happy to share their stories privately and publicly, for some families it was not once but several times. We really did feel like broken records at times!

At the end of Term 3, the 'National Code for Boarding Students' was endorsed by National Cabinet. ICPA were fortunate to be asked to provide feedback on the draft proposal put together by Senator Bridget McKenzie. 'The Code', aimed to provide nationally consistent arrangements to help boarding school students and their families, travel across borders between school and home, while also allowing states to take a risk-based approach to health and safety. Unfortunately, we never saw this fully implemented in states, as was intended. At the time, it was gratefully welcomed by ICPA-NSW and Federal ICPA, following our strong advocacy. We hoped that it was a step closer to achieving the national consistency that we had been pleading

for, by allowing rural and remote children equal access to education, no matter where they lived in Australia.

Regardless of this positive announcement, families faced another round of school holidays whereby they had to make difficult decisions about bringing their children home. Being a critical time for Year 12 students and with many children already having completed numerous quarantine periods, quite a few families made the difficult decision to leave their children in their respective states where they attended school, so they didn't have to encounter another quarantine period or encounter troubles at border checkpoints. On a personal note, we went 5 months without seeing our son 14-year-old son Angus, which had a huge impact on our whole family and we were not alone in this harrowing experience.

As the border closures continued, ICPA-NSW felt quite hopeless at times, as our advocacy to State governments seemed to fall on deaf ears, countless emails were left unanswered, and our members became more and more distressed as days went on. At times as State councillors, we were not only advocating for these people, but also acting as counsellors with countless phone calls and emails back and forth, providing a listening ear and words of support. 18 months of the pandemic and border closures, the uncertainty around when and if interstate borders could be with their families was exhausting and our members were feeling fatigued, disheartened and anxious.

ICPA-NSW held 3 Zoom sessions with members whose children boarded in Queensland, South Australia and Victoria. We offered support, advice and a platform for parents to ask questions and voice their concerns. The unfortunate reality at that time, was that with the worsening COVID-19 situation in NSW, other states were not willing to listen, let alone make allowances for our children, but we wanted our members to feel heard and assure them that we were doing all we could in the difficult space.

Some families with children boarding in South Australia participated in Wellbeing Support Zoom sessions with a Psychologist and Mental Health Worker from RFDS Southeastern Section. A space where we could share our stories, vent, cry and laugh. A catch-up BBQ was also organised for all the interstate boarders in South Australia at Westminster School for the beginning of Term 4. Boarders enjoyed feasting on lamb chops, toasted marshmallows and hung out with other kids who had all been on the same border closure journey. Many of these kids had not returned home for the school holidays, so it was perfect timing and gave them a boost to get through the remainder of the school year.

A big thank you to the RFDS for supporting our families during their time of need.

For the 2021 Year 12 cohort, nearly their entire last two years of schooling was affected by the pandemic. We heard from many members and their concerns for their children attempting to complete their secondary years in such a difficult climate. In September, we held a Zoom meeting, where we listened to the worries of Year 12s in NSW, collated them and shared them with New South Wales Education and Health Authorities.

We then offered online workshops with Danielle Miller OAM, “Supporting Your Teen to Make Term 4 Count”. Danielle is a guru in the wellbeing of teens and offered incredible advice for parents and Year 11 and 12 students on navigating the final years of learning during a pandemic.

At the Federal ICPA conference in Longreach in November, with most NSW delegates attending virtually due to border closures, so through our only representative, President Kate Warby, ICPA-NSW successfully moved the following motion ***“That ICPA (Aust) work with the Minister for Regionalisation, Regional Communication and Regional Education, to request the respective State Governments implement in an expeditious manner, a clear and consistent pathway for the Right of Appeals process under the current National Code for Boarding Students”***. Frustrations were being felt by Federal and fellow State ICPA councils around the ongoing uncertainty and inconsistency. We all needed ‘The Code’ to be implemented as intended on a national level. A joint media statement was released imploring all governments to implement ‘The Code’ as a matter of urgency.

As the end of 2021 was drawing near, we finally saw most borders open across Australia and restrictions ease. The relief that parents of interstate boarders felt was enormous. Could this nightmare be really coming to an end?

Many boarding students were elated to be reunited with their families in New South Wales and were able to enjoy the summer holidays spending much needed time at home to charge their batteries.

2022 has brought different challenges, as boarding houses navigate strict COVID-19 guidelines and regulations from State governments and managing outbreaks of positive cases and close contact rules in a boarding setting. Although it appears that border closures are long gone, now our children are facing recurrent isolation as close contacts or furthermore are contracting the COVID-19 virus. ICPA-NSW together with ICPA (Aust) and fellow State councils, have been working closely with Richard and the team from the Australian Boarding Schools Association, to relay the concerns of members to relevant government departments. COVID-19 is the gift that keeps giving, but let’s hope that the future months will bring positivity and dare I say a sense of normality for our boarding students.

ICPA-NSW sends our heartfelt thanks to Richard, Tom, Jared and the ABSA team for always being at the end of the phone when another issue presented and for their continued support throughout the past 2 years. The issues our members faced and we dealt with, in regards to COVID-19 and boarding, have been challenging to say the least, but you never shied away and were always available.

ICPA-NSW would particularly like to thank NSW Minister for Education and Early Childhood Sarah Mitchell and her advisor Sally Taylor, Senator Bridget McKenzie, Minister for Regional Education, Senator for New South Wales - Senator Perin Davey, NSW Minister for Women, Minister for Regional Health and Minister for Mental Health Bronnie Taylor, NSW Cross Border Commissioners and ICPA State Presidents for being available to answer our queries and quickly responding to some urgent situations as they arose.

To the public servants, especially those who made themselves available outside normal business hours, even during the highest moments of frustration, ICPA-NSW holds the deepest respect for the commitment you had to attempt to resolve situations as they arose. I note, there are some truly professional people out there who genuinely care.

My biggest thank you goes to fellow State Councillors, Kate Warby, ICPA-NSW QLD parent representative, and Claire Butler, ICPA-NSW Victorian parent representative. Their incredible knowledge, dedication and support through the crazy times last year kept me sane, just, and fueled me to persist through the most difficult of days.

Personally, a silver lining for me is the close connection I have developed with these two ladies and the knowledge I have gained from working alongside of them. We have had some wins along the way, and for that we should all be very proud.

To my fellow NSW boarding parents, it blows my mind and brings tears to my eyes when I recount what our families have endured since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Your endless commitment and willingness to battle through the constant barriers we have faced, is completely admirable.

Looking forward, I sincerely hope that the worst of the pandemic is behind us and **#nobordersforboarders** becomes a distant memory. A chapter in the history of ICPA-NSW, where our country was divided, but our mission remained the same, as fellow State Councillors over the past 50 years... to strongly advocate for equity of access to education for all students who live in rural and remote Australia.

Thank you for your time today.

Bree Wakefield
Health and Wellbeing Portfolio

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