

# ISOLATED CHILDREN'S PARENTS' ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA



## 2022 RURAL SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL TRAVEL PORTFOLIO CONFERENCE REPORT

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I feel very privileged to be able to present this report as the Rural Schools & School Travel Portfolio (RSST) leader. I certainly did not intend when I joined Council as an online conference participant in 2021 to be put straight on as a portfolio leader, however the RSST portfolio is an area that is very relevant to my day-to-day life, so I hope that I am able to assist Council with my knowledge in this area. My thanks must go to Alana Mahony and Nikki Mahony who have helped steer me on this portfolio path and the support of Anna McCorkle and Wendy Hick as assistants on this portfolio.

It all seemed very weird at first, here I was elected to a Federal Council but hadn't even met most of the people I would be working with. On my first delegation to Canberra in May of this year it was not the face of a fellow Councillor that had come to pick me up at the airport that I recognised; it was her voice as she chatted to another Councillor. How strange, but so very real has the zooming world become for many of us!

There were no Rural Schools Motions presented at Federal Conference in 2021.

While the pandemic has no doubt brought many challenges, the opportunities in our small rural schools have also opened many doors that were resisted previously just because "that's the way it has always been done".

The ability for staff in small schools to collaborate to get online lessons out to students in 2022 so effortlessly is a huge testament to the way it was done in 2020 and 2021. School closures in 2020 saw many students given work packs to collect from the school's front gate, whereas in 2022, there has been an opportunity to collate and distribute via various modes of technology for those students who are in isolation. The ability for staff at rural schools to upskill themselves and their students for the online delivery of lessons is commendable. The staff are not only training their students but the whole family is benefitting. Many families that previously had limited internet service and skills are now confidently navigating their way through the online world and for rural and remote schools this means that their students may now have access to a larger choice of resources compared to the past.

The benefits to education are obvious but the flow on effect that this has had on the rural economy and the ability for the skills in small communities has also grown.

The enabling and normalising of staff meetings to be held online over the various platforms has reduced the amount of time staff spend out of school. When travel is required, this can amount to considerable time away from the classroom throughout the year. Many small rural schools rely on their Principal to also teach in the classroom and time absent from their school is an obvious educational disadvantage to these students.

### **National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP)**

In 2019 and again in 2020, ICPA members raised the need for continuance of the National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP). Federal Council received assurance from then Minister for Decentralisation and Regional Education Hon Andrew Gee MP that his government had committed to permanent funding of the Program. With the recent change in the Government, ICPA (Aust) understands that there may be some amendments to the current Program. While official information on these proposed changes is not yet available, Federal Council will keep abreast of any developments in this regard and ensure these are communicated to members.

### **School Travel**

Four travel motions were presented and carried at the Federal Conference in 2021.

Travel to and from schooling includes vast distances on roads, rail and by air for geographically isolated families. A motion requesting the inclusion of a Fares Allowance in the Assistance for Isolated Children allowance, similar to Youth Allowance and ABSTUDY, was actioned with correspondence sent to the then Minister for Families and Social Services, Senator the Hon Anne Ruston and all relevant Ministers and Shadow Ministers for this to occur following Conference.

Federal Council also met virtually with Senator Ruston's advisors late last year to provide further information as to why our members are requesting the inclusion of a Fares Allowance in the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme. This was a positive meeting, and we will continue to raise this issue with the new government.

Affordable airfares for students continue to be a concern for many of our members, with two motions focussed on this topic. The pandemic has created obvious difficulties in the advocacy for more affordable airfares for geographically isolated students whose only reasonable measure of transport is flying to and from educational facilities. As the country is getting back into the air, Federal Council is hoping to continue these discussions with the new Government.

ICPA (Aust) is aware of several initiatives and developments across some States which address, to some extent, the need for improved access to affordable transport options for rural and remote students and their families.

Federal Council would welcome any further information from members who may be aware of initiatives or options which help to address this issue.

### **Road Travel – School Bus Routes**

The request raised at last year's Conference for federal funding for local councils in rural and remote areas to ensure prioritisation and maintenance of unsealed roads that are travelled by families accessing schools and school bus routes was made in a motion letter to the then Assistant Minister for Road Safety and Freight Transport, the Hon Scott Buchholz MP. ICPA (Aust) understands that while roads funding is largely a State responsibility, there are federal programs in place which deliver funding for local road maintenance, such as the 'Roads to Recovery Program'.

Further information can be found here <https://investment.infrastructure.gov.au/about/local-initiatives/roads-to-recovery-program/index.aspx>. Federal Council has requested a dedicated, federally funded road maintenance programs be allocated so that local government has the financial ability to prioritise school bus routes. While we have not received a response to these requests, we will continue to raise this topic wherever possible.

Prior to the May 2022 Federal election, several initiatives were announced by the former Federal Government in the Federal Budget 2022-23 for improving regional roads, including \$500 million to local councils to maintain and deliver priority road and community infrastructure projects across Australia. This included \$385.4 million for the Northern Australia Roads Program, as well as \$678 million for further sealing of roads on the Outback Way, a 2,720km route that links Laverton in Western Australia with Winton in Queensland via Alice Springs.

With a new Government now in place, ICPA (Aust) are hopeful that the 2022-23 Budget announcements will be upheld and prioritised so that families and school buses using rural and remote roads can travel safely on roads which are maintained to a high standard. Federal Council will monitor this and ensure members are informed of further developments.

More information can be found here: <https://budget.gov.au/2022-23/content/regions.htm>

### **Other Portfolio Activities**

At the end of April 2022, I welcomed the opportunity to facilitate a virtual joint ICPA Council portfolio meeting with members from each State Council. Motion updates and progress on the current motions were discussed. It was pleasing to hear from NSW State Council that 34 years after it was first suggested that seat belts be fitted to all school buses that this has now been achieved. Sometimes the wheels on the bus go around very slowly but maybe as our world gets more instant focused these sorts of decisions will take a little less time!

We continue to encourage members to contact Federal Council to share real-life scenarios and case studies to help us present the reality of what members are facing, a meaningful and robust way to arm us with the information that keeps conversations relevant. Federal Council will continue to look at ways to support State and Territory Councils in addressing disparity across the board.

Thank you to all representatives at Branch, State and Federal level for all the contributions you make to our rural and remote children. Your experiences collectively tell our story and enable us together, to make our geographically isolated students' educational journey the best it can be.