

# ISOLATED CHILDREN'S PARENTS' ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA



## 2023 FEDERAL CONFERENCE RURAL SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL TRAVEL PORTFOLIO REPORT Naomi Obst

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Rural Schools across Australia have in many cases returned to normal after the huge disruptions caused by the pandemic. In some areas of the curriculum the necessity to quickly upskill to provide learning online has enhanced the skills of the whole school community.

In the travel space, concerns continue for many families that rely on flights to attend boarding schools for compulsory education. Fares continue to stay high post pandemic and in many cases are higher.

The 2022 Federal Conference in Perth saw two motions presented in the Rural Schools and School Travel Portfolio, in relation to a Student Concessional Fares and the installation of sensor devices on buses that transport children.

### **Student Concessional Fares**

The request for Student Concessional Fares continues to be a topic of concern for many of our members. The current climate of very high airfares and an unusually high demand for air travel since the pandemic has seen airfares continue to rise and in many cases are more expensive than pre-pandemic fares.

During Federal Council delegation meetings in Canberra in October 2022 and again in May 2023 councillors spoke with Ministers, Members of Parliament and Senators to remind them of the expense of air travel for students accessing compulsory schooling. Whilst sympathetic to our plight, airlines are filling seats with the current high prices so the appetite to offer discounted fares is simply not there. Our advocacy continues to call for the inclusion of a fares allowance similar to that in place for ABSTUDY and within the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme.

Several programs have been instigated by various airlines and state governments since the pandemic which partially address the high cost of airfares for regional residents. However, these programs are not specifically designed to address students and their unique travel needs. We are hopeful that, as part of recognition by government and airlines of the needs of regional and rural Australia, coupled with continued advocacy from ICPA (Aust) we will eventually see a Student Concessional Fare. The current programs which Federal Council are aware of which may assist members include:

**REX:** It is pleasing to see that the expansion of the airline REX throughout Australia has enabled the introduction of the "Community Fare." There are various rules that need to be followed in order to qualify. More information can be found [here](#).

**Qantas:** Qantas has introduced the "Australian Resident Fares" program which offers residents from Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia discounted domestic economy return airfares from their local regional airport to their nearest capital city or major town. . More information can be found [here](#).



**WA:** The Western Australia Government has introduced a [Regional Airfare Zone Cap](#) which will extend to June 2025.

**Bonza – Here for Allstralia:** Bonza is Australia’s new and only independent, low cost airline servicing domestic and regional routes in Australia. They plan to operate 27 routes to 17 destinations (subject to regulatory approval) 93% of which are not currently serviced by an airline. More information can be found [here](#).

### **Sensor Devices on School Buses**

During the October 2022 and May 2023 face to face meetings in Canberra this concern was raised with various MPs and Senators. Many were surprised at the need for such a device and saw road conditions in rural areas as more of a safety priority. Nonetheless we were able to explain the recent tragedies and near misses that had occurred on buses with children being left behind in locked buses where locations can be remote and temperatures extreme.

ICPA (Aust) received correspondence from the Minister for Education, the Hon Jason Clare MP in response to our letter raising the request for the installation of sensors on buses. Minister Clare appreciated our concerns and the pressures placed on drivers and teachers who may undertake multiple roles to keep their students safe during transportation. However, he advised that the decision about the type of buses used and their safety features, is made by either the relevant state and territory governments or local government area. The Minister suggested that ICPA (Aust) reach out to state and territory Ministers to assist in finding the appropriate contacts to further this concern.

Despite this response, noting that the 2022 motion referred to school and childcare buses, Federal Council has since become aware of new national transportation rules implemented on 1 March for centre-based childcare services that provide regular transportation, whereby persons with management or control (PMCs) have these new obligations:

- Ensuring that a staff member or nominated supervisor, who is not the driver, accounts for and makes a record of children as they get in or out of a vehicle at a service.
- Ensuring records are made confirming a completed check of the inside of a vehicle at the service, after all children have left to ensure no children remain.
- Notifying the regulatory authority when your service starts providing or arranging regular transport, and again when your service finishes providing or arranging transport, which can be done via the [National Quality Agenda IT System](#).

Those who do not meet these requirements, will incur a financial penalty of at least \$2,000. Further details are available on the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) website [ACECQA](#).

Federal Council are also pleased to inform members of the Australasian New Car Assessment Program (ANCAP) stricter vehicle safety system for 2023, which includes an alert system that detects when a child has been left in a locked car. Some vehicles are already fitted with devices that will alert drivers when the car is turned off.

In their 2023 Statement ANCAP noted:

Child Presence Detection: Vehicles will be assessed for their ability to notify the driver or emergency services if a child has inadvertently been left in a locked car. Child Presence Detection (CPD) systems monitor the rear seats and/or doors and provide a visual or audible warning through the vehicle’s infotainment system upon exiting, a honk of the car horn, a notification or alert to an app on the driver’s mobile phone, or an “eCall” alert to emergency services. More advanced systems may also





## **National School Chaplaincy Program**

In June 2023, the Australian Government released further details on the changes made to the Chaplaincy Program now known as “The National Student Wellbeing Program” (NSWP). ICPA (Aust) members have recurrently maintained their support for the National School Chaplaincy Program and their desire for it to continue. In September 2022, Federal Council lodged a submission to the *independent evaluation of the National School Chaplaincy Program* emphasising ICPA (Aust) members view of the positive and valuable impact the program has had for rural and remote students and schools who, due to their location, may have limited access to other support services. ICPA (Aust) recommended that the program be maintained to ensure the vulnerable cohort of rural and remote students who may have no or limited access to other support services are not further disadvantaged. Federal Council were encouraged by Minister Clare’s commitment to maintaining the program, in some form, when meeting with him during delegations in October 2022. A copy of the ICPA (Aust) Submission can be found [here](#).

In November 2022, the evaluation report was handed down, with six recommendations made. The full report can be found [here](#).

The Federal Department of Education website notes that *‘the independent evaluation of the NSCP found that it provided valued support for the wellbeing of students and school communities. Recommendation 4 of the Evaluation specifically supported the Government’s decision to open up the program in 2023 to provide schools with the choice to employ either Student Wellbeing Officers or Chaplains.’*

The NSWP will be funded \$61.4 million each year as an Australian Government contribution to the wellbeing of school communities. This funding is provided to states and territories who are responsible for administering the program. Remote or very remote schools can receive up to \$24,336 per year.

Principals can organise a NSWP to meet the needs of their school community. Parents will need to be notified and can choose to withdraw their child from the program at regular intervals. All NSWP officers must complete an online 2.5 hour Professional Learning Package in responding to and preventing cyberbullying within three months of starting the service and revisit the module every 2.5 years to maintain their certificate of completion.

## **Teacher Workforce**

Nationwide teacher workforce shortages across the country have been well publicised, however for rural and remote locations these issues can be even more challenging, due to the nature of working in these contexts. ICPA (Aust) welcomes the Federal Government’s development of the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan and has been involved in various aspects of the Plan including lodging an online submission to the Plan in December 2022.

We addressed key issues specifically related to initial teacher education, teachers, and teaching in rural and remote Australia. Education providers must ensure that the initial education content delivered both theoretical and practical, is contextually appropriate and that all teachers working in geographically isolated schools are specifically trained and prepared to teach this cohort. Authentic social and emotional support of students will help address the behavioural issues that continually interrupt effective teaching in many classrooms. Specific behaviour and classroom management strategies need to be part of all initial teacher education courses. Clear and definite networks of sharing effective and successful systems between teachers at rural and remote schools to facilitate a



culture of mentoring and collegiality across regions could avoid the time consuming 're-inventing the wheel' at separate schools.

Elevation of a culture that supports, values and respects teachers, with incentives to draw them to rural and remote regions so they feel well prepared and classroom ready will alleviate many of the reasons teachers leave their profession.

Federal Council also welcomed and wish to draw member's attention to the *Reduction of Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) debts for teachers in very remote areas*. This is a positive acknowledgement of additional challenges felt in very remote areas and hopefully is an encouraging first step in better supporting all very remote, remote and rural teachers, students and schools. More information on this new scheme can be found [here](#).

### **Conclusion**

I would like to thank members for their contributions to the Rural School and School Travel portfolio. Your motions, explanations and case studies are what drives the direction of this portfolio. Grateful thanks to fellow portfolio members who are always on hand to assist with clarification, explanation, or technical IT directions!