
NSW State Council President's Report

Distinguished Guests, Members, Ladies and Gentlemen

ICPA has taken the role over the last fifty-two years of being the voice of rural and remote parents - opening pathways for students and keeping them accessible to families. It has been an absolute privilege to be part of that work, together with your State and Federal Councils over the last 12 months.

Our annual NSW State Conference was held in Dubbo on 6th and 7th March, hosted by Central West Plains Branch. It was wonderful to have over 120 registrations, over 70 motions from 18 branches representing over 70 member families over the two days. It is always fantastic for our branches to be able to showcase their community. It is pleasing to see so many members and stakeholders come together to meet in such a great rural community and to discuss and debate our concerns and issues surrounding access to education for our children once again.

The conference saw our Treasurer Nathan Kitto and Allowances Portfolio holder Bree Wakefield step off State Council. We have now welcomed Georgina Luckraft who has taken on the Treasurer role and Tegan Barton for joining Council as the Allowances Portfolio holder.

There were several life memberships and certificates awarded during the conference, congratulations to Ellen Walker and Lindy Kitto who received NSW State Life Memberships, David Butler received Life Membership of Nyngan Branch and Sue Kingwill of Contact a Certificate of Appreciation for their many years of service and support of ICPA. Each of the recipients have been long-term advocates and participants of ICPA and their contributions and dedication are greatly appreciated.

With a slightly earlier conference it meant everything was brought forward and most of us spent the Christmas/New Year break working on conference matters. We thought that we might have a breather after conference however with Easter/NSW school holidays, sitting dates and councillor availability we soon found ourselves preparing for our main deputation to Sydney in early May. As other State Councillors are aware there is much preparation in the time between conference and meeting with each of the stakeholders involved to co-ordinate approximately 40 meetings during that week of delegations, then following up with meetings with those unavailable until recently.

Our conference continued to raise some issues we have been long advocating for but also brought new issues to the table. A change in government meant a sense of uncertainty as to how the change would impact our issues and the motions that members brought to the conference. Fortunately, we had developed relationships with most of the shadow ministers during past deputations, but it is interesting to navigate when they are in the hot seat.

Some updates from the year have been:

- Continuation of the School Drive Subsidy Trial for Preschoolers which has now closed, and we are waiting to hear if this will be made a permanent form of assistance for those parents transporting their preschool-age children to access early education.
- Bus NSW submitted a proposal to the NSW Government to install safety devices to prevent students from being left on buses. We are now seeing a gradual rollout of safety devices on new buses.
- NBN rollout completed for all NSW Distance Education families.
- Continued monthly meetings with the Department of Education Regional, Rural & Remote Implementation (RRRI) Unit and major stakeholder in new Rural and Remote Education Strategy – targeting

- tailored housing support,
- strengthening professional connections, and
- rural and remote staffing support.
- Starting in July 2025, university and TAFE students who complete mandatory placements studying courses like teaching, nursing, social work, and midwifery will receive payments of over \$300 a week during the duration of their placements.
- A Review into Distance Education delivery.

We appreciate all the time and effort that has been put in by all levels of ICPA, various stakeholders, Government and policy makers to achieve these outcomes.

Access to funding and workload sustainability is something NSW State Council continue to discuss and navigate. Since coming on to State Council in 2017 the expectations both physically and professionally appears to be increasing rapidly.

Seeking and writing grant applications to secure funding for upgrades to our technological resources, governance and training, department and stakeholder meetings, portfolio holder meetings, deputations, branch executive and state council meetings just to get through daily operations is a juggle for councillors who also hold other full time positions and have businesses to run.

We have this year made the following submissions and presentations to Parliamentary Inquiries & Reviews:

- Rural Health Inquiry
- Rural and Regional Affairs Inquiry into the shutdown of the 3G mobile network
- Improving Access to Early Childhood Health & Development checks
- Arts & Music Education & Training in NSW
- Children & Young People with Disability in NSW Educational Settings
- Covid 19 Response Inquiry
- Disability Royal Commission
- National Trend of School Refusal & related matters
- Distance Education Review
- Teacher Shortages in NSW
- Student & Parent Experience, Learning Improvement – Community Engagement Policy, Code of Conduct and Complaints procedure.

As NSW State Council we are often requested to provide letters of support to our stakeholders and partners in their various grant applications and activities. It is through this collaborative effort that we are able to support and work together for better outcomes.

This year we saw one of our last far western boarding facilities, Allison House at Broken Hill close its doors at the end of Term 1 due to financial unviability and low numbers. We have been working with the board, staff, families, federal and state local members and local community to try and find solutions both in the short term for those students who were residing at the hostel and for long term funding and viability of the facility. This also prompted a survey of members and families living in the far west of the state to ascertain what their future educational needs were. Among other data we have been able to determine a definite need for a boarding facility in the far west which has been a motion for some time and we are now advocating for.

State Council have been made aware through local communities and motions brought to conference of the need for preschools to be run in conjunction with local village primary schools. We have been advocating for this and successfully have distance education preschool running in a couple of small schools however these do not cater for three-year-olds, which in these cases, children do not have

access to any other early education and one day per week will not provide students with anywhere near the 600 hours before starting school.

Along with the preschool students we are aware of secondary aged students in these remote villages who also have no access to school facilities.

NSW State Government last year announced 100 preschools would go into existing Public-School sites in areas of disadvantage and where no services existed. Whilst this investment in early childhood is greatly appreciated, in some communities with existing community preschools, they are now competing for funding, staff and causing division within communities. Many of these sites are in rural and remote areas and are in direct competition, in particular many are small Aboriginal preschools as confirmed by SNAICC (the peak body for Aboriginal children). A perfect example of Government rolling out an initiative that is a fantastic plan, but we know that each community is unique, and one size does not fit all.

Many of our philanthropy and funding stakeholders/partners such as Bush Children's Education Fund (BCEF) are acknowledging many challenges due to strong ongoing demand for Rural Boarding Bursaries and various scholarships, as many families are looking for financial assistance to help alleviate the growing costs of education. The oversubscribed uptake of the Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program has delivered 100 scholarships, worth up to \$20,000 a year, to families in regional, rural and remote communities to assist with the costs of children attending boarding school.

There was significant demand for the scholarships with 353 applications for the national intake for the 2024 scholarships and already over 260 enquiries regarding opportunities for future scholarships which also signifies families need for financial assistance.

When a child leaves home to attend boarding school or hostel they are effectively leaving home and will spend more time at their place of education for the majority of their teenage years than in their family home. Fortunately, we have partners like Amanda Ferrari of Boarding Schools Expo to help families navigate this emotional and financial investment to find the best possible home away from home for our students. We also work closely with Richard Stokes and his team at the Australian Boarding Schools Association to support our schools and their staff to bridge gaps and understand the perspectives and needs of both families and boarding schools.

Working with philanthropic organisations to promote the financial and emotional support that they provide, can help families access assistance that they may otherwise not have known about.

We as an organisation are so fortunate to have the support of the likes of Amanda and the ABSA Team. These partnerships work both ways, but we certainly wouldn't have such successful relationships between our schools and families without them. We try and have representatives attend the Expos around the state whenever we can and promote these organisations at every opportunity.

Speaking at various forums and presenting for advocacy through events held by Thrive by Five and the Rural and Remote Action Group, local Regional Development Authority and community events all helps to promote ICPA and raise awareness of our issues at many levels.

The solutions offered by ICPA-NSW are pragmatic and discussions have been positive, however, it is a continued frustration for our members that things take years to be implemented and that means for many children, the gaps in their learning and development remain. Our goal, our mission is to endeavour that no rural or remote child misses the opportunity to have an education that embraces all these factors. This is the base level of education all our children deserve.

Accepting we have a formal education system is not enough. Disparities in benchmarking, NAPLAN testing, and tertiary participation rates highlight existing inequalities. The evidence suggests that, despite the system's form, some rural and remote students face significant disadvantages due to their geographical location. Advocacy efforts need to focus on ensuring every child has an equal chance to reach their potential.

ICPA-NSW emphasises the importance of recognising and addressing these disparities. NAPLAN and AEDC results, while providing a snapshot of academic performance and developmental domains, should not be the only metrics for evaluating the success of education in rural areas. The association calls for a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by students, considering geographical and socio-economic factors that impact their performance and development.

ICPA-NSW recognises the importance of collaboration with non-government stakeholders, local communities, and businesses. While acknowledging the constraints faced by government departments, we actively engage with them to address challenges. In the past year, ICPA-NSW has actively supported and promoted innovative solutions to address pressing issues within its membership. For instance, the introduction of new preschool at Wanaaring, demonstrates a proactive approach to early childhood education in remote areas. The collaboration extends beyond the education sector, sometimes involving various stakeholders committed to improving the overall well-being of rural and remote communities. By working together, ICPA-NSW aims to create a network of support that goes beyond the confines of formal education, addressing the broader challenges faced by families living in remote areas.

Parents and families play a crucial role in shaping a child's education. Recognising that students who attend small rural schools or are educated by distance education spend much of their time being influenced by the community around them, ICPA-NSW emphasises the importance of schools engaging deeply with families in our rural and remote communities. A united approach involving P&Cs, Parent Associations, local governments, and other community partners is deemed essential for the success of educational initiatives and the success of staff teaching in small rural communities.

I would like to briefly remind everyone that ICPA as an organisation is run by volunteers. Your Federal and State Councillors all have day jobs, businesses, properties to run, families, some supervise school at home, are carers for others, sit on committees and hold other positions within the communities in which they live. We somehow manage to fit in ICPA as well. So if not a paid position then why? Because we are passionate and believe in all children having the right to access an equitable education. By working together, we can support our children to reach their aspirations and be strong future contributors to their communities and wider society. Every child, no matter where they live, deserves a quality and appropriate education.

Tanya Mitchell

President ICPA-NSW