
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 Wellness – COVID-19 Report.

2020 brought many new challenges to boarding, particularly for those kids attending school interstate. The beginning of the pandemic in Australia saw some states close their borders to avoid the transfer of COVID-19. This proceeded to have a huge effect on NSW families, whose children boarded in SA, QLD and Victoria. It became quickly apparent that ICPA-NSW would need to advocate for these families, as state governments were fiercely protecting their states and were not seeing the importance of interstate students having access to their education.

This personally affected our family, as my son Angus began his boarding journey in Adelaide last year. He completed two x 14-day quarantine, missing 4 weeks of the school year which had a huge effect on his schooling.

When ICPA-NSW decided to form a covid committee to assist their many members battling cross border issues, I was asked to join as the South Australian Parent representative and was also co-opted onto state council.

From the ICPA-NSW surveys, there were 24 NSW families whose children boarded in South Australia, 229 in Queensland and 68 in Victoria. ICPA-NSW also established there were a number of rural Victorian children boarding in NSW.

Each group were affected by border closures throughout 2020.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

South Australia closed its border to all other states on the 21st March, 2020. Interstate boarders were sent home and commenced remote learning for the remainder of Term 1. Like the rest of Australia, this was a disjointed process as most schools clambered to completely change their delivery of learning.

When face to face learning resumed in Term 2, those students that returned to South Australia had to complete 14 days of quarantine before they were able to commence school.

Some families chose to complete this at private residences in SA, while other students were able to quarantine at their boarding houses. My son Angus quarantined in his room at Prince Alfred College. He had his meals delivered and was only able to spend 2 x 10 minutes outside each day, wearing a mask and gloves. I liken it to solitary confinement and although he coped fine mentally, we decided that we would not put him in that situation again.

Other schools were unable to welcome students back to boarding at all, as their facilities did not meet the strict criteria under the AHPPC guidelines and were not deemed “COVID safe”.

This was a confusing time for families, with such difficulties arising from something as simple as accessing education, just because they lived in a different state. In these early days, many letters were written to relevant state and federal ministers to convey their plight and hoping that the SA government and SA Health would see sense and categorise these children as essential travellers. Frustration was felt when industries such as mining were deemed more important than the education of the next generation. There was also great concern that with long term border closures, parents would not have access to their children and that this uncertainty would pose significant risk to their mental health.

It was around this time that ICPA (Aust) and other state councils, including ICPA-NSW, came on board. The disproportionate hardship of interstate boarders accessing their education had become a national issue and particularly for NSW families.

They began advocating for recognition of essential traveller status for interstate boarders and for quarantine restrictions to be lifted. Contact was made with politicians at a state and federal level and media releases written to get more attention brought to the issue.

Media interest was generated quickly, and parents and state councillors conducted many radio interviews and spoke to various journalists for newspaper and tv stories.

ICPA-NSW would like to thank these media outlets for their time and coverage of this important issue.

In the meantime, students boarding in SA schools were adhering to strict guidelines.

Staggered mealtimes, social distancing and restricted leave to name a few. My son's school was only allowing leave with immediate family, which was another blow for interstate parents as we couldn't even cross the border to get to our children.

Some students were suffering from anxiety caused by the unknown of when they would be able to return home to see their loved ones and the worry of having to quarantine for a second or third time which left them vulnerable and scared.

At the commencement of Term 3, the SA/NSW border was not opened as promised, due to a rise in COVID-19 cases. ICPA-NSW worked quickly to urge the SA government to take into consideration that a majority of their affected members, were able to self-isolate on their geographically isolated properties and posed no risk of bringing COVID-19 into SA. ICPA-NSW received information from the SA Premier's office that an exemption from quarantine would need to be provided by SA Health and that this would be considered on a case-by-case basis by the transition team.

Some families were able to receive an exemption due to the rural and remote locality of their properties, which was a big win for ICPA-NSW.

Throughout the months of dealing with SA Government, SA Health and SAPOL it was clear that there were many inconsistencies. Directives were constantly changing and there was misinformation given at border crossings.

One family were denied a rural and remote exemption despite living on a geographically isolated property and having self-isolated for the school holidays. At the SA border they were granted an exemption for their son to return to boarding in Adelaide. This was revoked 3 days later after their child had already returned to school, as the policemen, who were only trying to make a sensible decision, did not have the authority to give exemptions. However, a week before they had. The inconsistencies were frustrating to say the least.

Another family were not allowed to have their son's car picked up by friend from the SA border and delivered to him in Adelaide, as it had been in Victoria and may contain COVID-19. They were only denied at the border, after they had driven 120kms from Mildura.

There are so many more stories like these that I could share.

With all the inconsistencies and no real solution for interstate boarders, ICPA-NSW and ICPA NT developed a survey to gather data on the exact number of students affected and if they were able to self-isolate. The results really showcased the dire situation that NSW families were facing.

Minister for Regional Education Andrew Gee and Senator for NSW Perin Davey took particular interest in our plight and became very vocal on the unfair situation.

Their passion, understanding and common-sense approach were voiced loud and clear, with Minister Gee presenting our survey results on Sky News. This was after the survey had in fact been tabled at National Cabinet. He also organised a roundtable discussion with government officials and relevant stakeholders. It became clear that these families needed a consistent and clear nationwide framework moving forward.

With the Term 3 holidays looming and the possibility of a 3rd quarantine for some students, ICPA-NSW made good use of their contacts at SAPOL and SA Health and worked with families to get nearly all the

NSW children, who boarded in SA, exemptions from quarantine. The families applied to SA Health with the package of documents and templates that were developed by ICPA-NSW.

The border was opened before Term 4 began, but it was a huge relief for families to know that their children could come home for holidays and return to finish the school year without quarantining.

The final school term of 2020 was not without drama. When SA announced their 5-day lockdown at 2pm on the 20th of November, families scrambled to get their children out of the state by midnight.

2021 began with a border closure and previous exemption arrangements with SA Health were revoked. Thankfully the borders opened before the school year commenced, but this highlights the need for a permanent coordinated and consistent approach moving forward.

QUEENSLAND

Boarding schools ended a few days early in Term 1 because of the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic. Term 2 was spent at home, schooling from all the various distances, using Microsoft Teams effectively to communicate with teachers. Some children, and all year 12 students were encouraged to return to school for the last four weeks of term 2. The restrictions made boarding very different and some of the younger students found the restrictions hard to handle, especially feeling lonely in dormitories because of the social distancing rules. The QLD Chief Health Officer issued a statement allowing children to return without quarantining, saying that it would be disproportionate to a rural/remote child's education to make them quarantine, however at the end of Term 2 things took a dramatic turn for the worse and it became apparent that if children returned home to NSW for school holidays, they would have to quarantine in QLD on return. Considering the children were returning to rural and remote properties, ICPA-NSW pivoted quickly into a vigorous campaign.

Term 3 saw the Queensland Government established a border bubble on postcodes on both sides of the border to allow free movement for these families living in the bubble to travel into their towns across the border. Those living on the border also access school in the other state on a day-to-day basis. The bubble was fine for some, but the families who were left out because of the cut off of the postcode area. This was as simple as across the road!! Anxiety, mental stress and emotional unrest set in for parents and students as the hard close on the border and the inequitable situation with the postcodes took it's toll. It was frightening to think parents and students were not seeing each other for a whole term.

In conjunction with ICPA (Aust) and ICPA Qld Inc, much advocacy took place to try and get the Queensland Premier and Chief Health officer to understand the plight. This advocacy included an online rally, meetings, numerous letters, constant media coverage being print, radio and TV. ICPA-NSW put together a very heartfelt and to the point video on Facebook sharing stories from students and parents many kilometres apart telling their sad and emotional stories. The video shared succinct photos of pets missing students, and younger siblings traumatised by not seeing sisters and brothers for the September holidays. Mayors of shires, school Principals and ABSA joined the constant lobbying, which most of the time seemed to be falling on deaf ears by State Government Officials.

In August at the Federal conference of ICPA (Aust), ICPA-NSW successfully moved a motion "That ICPA (Aust) urge the Minister for Regional Education to establish an Isolated Children's Pandemic Advisory Group made up of State and Federal Education Ministers and Relevant Authorities, ABSA and ICPA representatives to ensure consistent decisions are made specific to the needs of geographically isolated children who must cross the state borders in order to access education." This motion was carried.

Right at the end of Term 3, education was given an exemption to travel to Queensland and collect students and return without quarantining in Term 4, as long as the whole family stayed on their own property or in their house yard and did not have visitors. Families were to arrive at the Queensland border

with a signed Statutory Declaration declaring this was the case. Throughout the holidays constant changes from the Government continued. All the while there was no COVID-19 cases anywhere in the northern part of New South Wales. On return to school parents were not allowed into boarding houses to settle their children. To assist parents, ICPA-NSW provided members with a pack which consisted of a Statutory Declaration Template, a travel diary and property risk management plans.

Many important school functions such as formals, graduation and valedictory dinners were cancelled or changed to meet the rules of the restrictions. These milestones are important for the students involved, so we can imagine the disappointment that followed such changes.

2021 has seen a return of all students without hiccups. Border passes were required to cross the border to ensure people had not been in one of the 35 Local government areas around Sydney where COVID-19 had been. Parents were allowed into boarding houses if they used the QR code or signed in. As from 1 February 2021 there will be no Queensland border check point, and no border pass required. It is crazy to think that since March 2020 until now New South Wales residents have only had 3 weeks of crossing the border without a pass.

VICTORIA

With the ongoing outbreaks in Victoria, boarding students spent the better part of 6 months remote learning. On the 7th July, when the NSW Government closed the border, ICPA-NSW at least had the benefit of knowing who to contact within Parliament to advocate for the Public Health Order to specifically recognise school students, who must travel interstate to access an education.

We did wonder if our initial requests to “not repeat what happened in SA” had in fact backfired when there was indeed a rule made for boarding children, however it stated that a child boarding in Victoria must return home to NSW via flying through the Sydney airport. ICPA-NSW vigorously advocated against this condition because it was completely unacceptable to fly minors through international airports and then have parents pick them up from Sydney airport and potentially spread COVID-19 into the regions when all the while a child could travel the most direct sterile corridor home to isolate on their farm. There were case by case issues whereby exemptions were granted, during this brief time, however, it needs to be noted that ICPA-NSW did in fact have members who had children who did have to fly into Sydney airport and then drive 900kms home. It was of course a huge relief when eventually an 8B permit was issued for the movement of children and their parents across the NSW/Vic border. There was also the reverse situation with children who lived in Victoria and went to school in NSW, and of course the recent Victorian border closure which caused a few headaches along the way, however a large border bubble has protected many members from angst – school is now back but the snap shutdown recently and brief return to remote learning is a reminder that this can change at any moment.

ICPA-NSW would particularly like to thank Superintendent Scott Denny, SA Police Border Commander and the Cross Border Commissioners from both NSW and Victoria (Luke Wilson and Emma Watts especially), Senator for NSW Perin Davey, NSW Minister for Education Sarah Mitchell and her advisor Sally Taylor, Roy Butler MP, Kate Warby, Secretary of Moree branch, Alana Moller Federal ICPA President and Minister for Regional Education Andrew Gee and all the ICPA State Presidents for being available to answer our queries and for quickly responding to some urgent situations that arose. To the public servants especially who made themselves available outside normal business hours, even during the highest moments of deep frustration, ICPA-NSW holds the deepest respect for the commitment these people had to resolving situations as they arose – there are some truly professional people out there who genuinely care and that is attested by their willingness to trust us with their direct mobile phone numbers and speak to us after hours so that we could get outcomes as quickly as possible.

To my fellow NSW boarding parents, the way you have all conducted yourself throughout this ordeal just goes to show how resilient, versatile and adaptable you all are. We spent the year flying blind and

dealing with each blow as it came. We stood our ground and will continue to do whatever we need to, to ensure our kids can have access to their education and be able to return home for holidays and recharge.

As a parent I cannot thank ICPA-NSW enough for their commitment and continuous support in what has been the rollercoaster ride of the COVID-19 pandemic. So very grateful for your persistence when we weren't given the answers we were looking for and the time invested in helping our kids is just incredible.

It has been an absolute pleasure to work closely with Claire, Libby and Mon on the cross-border issues. We had some great achievements in 2020 for families and although it is clear that we will be facing the same issues heading into 2021, we will continue to advocate for our members to ensure that their interstate borders have access to their vital education.

Looking forward, ICPA-NSW are committed to seeing the development of clear and sensible directives from relevant state governments and will continue to advocate for equity in access to education for affected families.

BY BREE WAKEFIELD