

Distinguished Guests, Members, Ladies and Gentleman

We all wonder what the future will hold for our children. What lives, what careers they will have, what people they will be. None of those things we can fully know, but we do know that they will have hopes and dreams, and face challenges and problems in differing aspects of their lives as they unfold. Our task as parents and as a community is to make them the best prepared to meet the future as we all go forward. We want our children, together with all other children, to have mountains of opportunity.

A very important part of that preparation is their schooling. Not just education in the narrow sense of Naplan Testing and ATAR's, but a full chance to participate in the opportunities of youth as preparation for life as an adult – academic, vocational, creative, cultural and physical. A full chance to develop potential in whatever sense their own particular nature suggests, and to take that potential and in turn set about creating the best future for the next generation. ICPA wants that opportunity for rural and remote children just as every parent wants that opportunity for their own children.

There are some people who say that you can have equity in education, or you can have choice, but you cannot have both. Those voices don't know our environment and our children as we do. For each child to be on the agenda, each child to be given the chance to develop their own particular strengths in a rural or remote setting, will necessitate different options. Sparse populations and big distances of rural and remote communities will mean that not just one particular type of schooling can possibly cater to all students in every area of learning. Rather, we have to create and maintain pathways for each and all manner of endeavours so that parents can make the choices as to which path will fit their particular child; starting from early childhood and leading on to a rural school, distance education or a boarding school, before culminating in higher education, vocational training or learning on the job. To have equity in education we need to have some choice which will be exercised in consideration of the needs of the child. Parents are better able to make that choice in respect of each child than is the government, and will to the maximum extent possible be free to make that choice by having each pathway kept open in a practical and accessible manner to them.

To those who say that these pathways are already sufficient, that an appropriate education already lies available to virtually every child, you make a victory of form over substance. Yes, almost all children can access a curriculum and a teacher who will be doing their absolute best to teach the child under adverse circumstances – the form of schooling is available. We understand that. But every other indication...every other bit of evidence, indicates that many students simply must be suffering disadvantage due to location – look at the benchmarking, the Naplan testing, the tertiary participation rates. What are the disparities in those numbers telling us? The evidence simply must be telling us that the substance of an education for some rural and remote families is lacking even though the form is in place. It must be telling us that for some students, it cannot in any true sense be said that an appropriate education is available, one that gives them every chance to reach their potential. Having a victory of form over substance in education to the severe disadvantage of some of our children is not something we can accept. We need to be making that evidence-based argument as strongly as possible to our politicians, both state and federal.

ICPA has taken the role over the last fifty-one years of being the voice of rural and remote parents - opening those pathways 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.

We shouldn't limit ourselves by always looking simply to Government in building mountains of opportunity. We should also look to where communities, local government, businesses and other stakeholders can assist. One of the most gratifying aspects of the last year has been to see the collaboration between ICPA-NSW and the many other non-government stakeholders, working together to tease out solutions to issues arising within our membership.

However, inevitably a large share of our work will be with the state government as the major public provider of education and we as ICPA-NSW need to make sure that it does not fail to provide what is needed to optimise opportunity for regional and remote students. We are very fortunate to have some great people involved in rural and remote education and school travel in their respective Departments, who make themselves very available to ICPA whenever an issue arises. We must understand that these people very often are constrained in what they can achieve by budgets and competing interests. However, I am very confident those current Departmental people with whom we closely work genuinely have the interests of our children in their view, and are willing to work with ICPA where they can to achieve better outcomes.

This is evident as NSW State Council continue to hold fortnightly meetings with the Rural Regional and Remote Education Policy Unit within NSW Department of Education. We have found this regular connection with the Department invaluable and are able to address long standing motions as well as any new issues that are arising for members as they come to our attention. We are able to discuss matters across many of our portfolios and have access to many people in the Department that we would not otherwise be able to meet with. I feel and I hope the RRREP Unit do as well, that it has been a very successful and productive use of our time and advocacy.

We all have a role to play in achieving those better outcomes for our rural and remote students, and none more so than parents and families. Students only spend 14% of their time at school, with 86% of their time spent with family and communities. Even the very best education system supported by the very best teachers will be limited in what can be achieved if the education and values imposed at school are not reinforced at home. In recognising this, I think it is vital that schools and other educational services deeply engage with families and communities as a matter of priority, with P&C's, with Parent Associations, with their local governments and other community partners. I don't think one can succeed without the other. I don't think teachers and schools can succeed with our children unless they seek out, and they receive, the support and co-operation of the whole network surrounding the child.

ICPA is of course an organisation seeking equity of access to education for all students living in a rural and remote area. But what is it that we are actually seeking? I suggest we can break down that goal putting our efforts into providing our rural and remote children with access to wide and interesting curriculums taught by a great teacher in a school which is led by an effective Principal. We want to start opportunities early making sure that any kids that are likely to fall through the cracks get the special support they need. Our goal, our mission should be to endeavour that no rural or remote child misses the opportunity to have an education that embraces all of these factors. This is the base level of education all our children deserve. Many of these matters are taken up in the portfolio reports and motions and will be discussed over the next couple of days.

Most of Government and the Department are well aware of the problems in providing this level of education. For ICPA-NSW to go to these people armed with only the problems we have doesn't add a great deal. What is needed is good hard thought about the solutions. Solutions that recognise the constraints that government and the Department work under, which is to work under restrictive budgets and having to deal with many equity and lobby groups, not just ourselves. But if we go to these people with an evidence-based approach and thought around solutions then we quickly separate

ourselves out from other lobby groups that can only discuss their problems, and we may get a more favourable hearing. ICPA-NSW has in the last year been providing and supporting innovative solutions that I believe fit problems facing our education system, including for example new pre-schooling options at Wanaaring, better communications in the vicinity of remote isolated schools, training possibilities for distance education supervisors, support for TP1 & TP2 schools and alternative schooling options for geographically isolated secondary students not able to access an education. Everyone usually has a reasonable grasp of the problems – it is the solutions that can be thin on the ground and that is where ICPA-NSW can make a great difference to the conversation.

We are all here because we want education to change from its current state for the sake of our children. We are a group asking for change. We're saying that the fact that Year 7 remote students have lower NAPLAN results than Year 5 metropolitan provincial students is not good enough. We're saying the fact that by age 15 children in rural schools are one and a half years behind their metropolitan peers is not good enough. We're saying the fact that less 25–34-year-olds from regional areas have a Bachelor degree compared to the same age group in cities needs to change. We then have to be accepting, embracing that change when it does come if we can perceive the potential benefits. We are currently seeing in politics that implementing change is enormously risky for governments as it is so easily attacked by its opponents. If we want change in rural and remote education then we have to provide the reformers with the confidence that if they act on our issues we will fully and vocally support them.

ICPA-NSW needs to do all it can to embrace this type of education in each and every community. Without doubt the best possible solution is to have a choice to be able to access this type of education locally. However, after having done everything possible to drive this mission, if for reasons temporary or otherwise it is not possible to achieve this type of education in the local community for a child, then I think we are morally justified to request that the Government and Department, even temporarily, support that child to move to another community of schooling where he or she will access this type of education. By taking this approach we're saying that every child deserves an appropriate education. Let's all try our very best to provide that locally. If, however on a frank and honest appraisal it cannot do so then let's work to minimise the impact that shortcoming will have on the destiny of the child involved. If we elevate the interests of the student as having primacy as well as an honest appraisal of the schooling involved in our most complex communities and we determine that even temporarily that schooling is not what it ought to be, then it seems fair to the child that will be seriously disadvantaged by lack of access to an appropriate school, that support be given to taking that child to education elsewhere. Let's act locally first with all our efforts but be brave enough to admit when our education system has local shortcomings and that alternatives in education might temporarily be beneficial to our children. The system of schooling is a means to an end and not an end in itself to those students in remote areas that have no alternative options for an education.

While advancements in education and technology are making the task of providing an appropriate education easier, there are other forces making it more difficult. The demographic story of remoteness is that populations in remote and regional NSW continue to decline, only the largest regional centres grow. The consequent reality is that many small schools will continue to lose populations and the pressure is on the Government and Department to transfer resources from rural areas to metropolitan areas when new schools are needed to cope with population growth. This should not cloud the fact that every child, no matter where they live, deserves an appropriate education.

Tanya Mitchell
President