
President's Report

Distinguished Guests, Members, Ladies and Gentleman

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.

The much-anticipated ICPA NSW 51st State Conference was held in Moree on 22 and 23 March last year and it was wonderful to have over 120 registrations. We had to cancel the previous conference that was to be held in Moree in 2020 due to Covid so it was fantastic for the branch to finally be able to showcase their community. It was great to have 14 branches represented and over 46 members attend during the week but as you would have heard me mention earlier, today we have 18 branches represented and over 70 members present. It is pleasing to see so many members and stakeholders come together to meet in such a great rural community and to once again discuss and debate our concerns and issues surrounding access to education for our children.

Our last conference fell two days before the NSW State Election which saw a change in Government and a sense of uncertainty as to how the change would impact our issues and the motions that members brought to the conference.

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.
- A \$250 fuel travel card for Apprentices and Tertiary students was implemented by the previous NSW Government (however this has since been removed by the new state government) so we still seek to have a tertiary travel subsidy implemented.
- 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 on some new buses of safety devices that we will hear about later in the Travel Portfolio.
- Early Childhood Wage Review - 5.75% Increase to Children's Services Award and Educational Services Teachers Award From 01 July 2023.
- NBN rollout for all NSW Distance Education families.

- Continued monthly meetings with the Department of Education Regional, Rural & Remote Education Policy (RRREP) Unit.
- All 12 satellite schools in NSW have been transferred to Fibre Optic connections.

Some may recall the Balranald branch communications motion back in 2013 at the Federal Conference which related to these connections was lost but a year later carried, so please do not get disheartened if you lose a motion today, as this is what can be achieved if you stay focused and not take no for an answer. Sometimes we may have to look at an issue and present it differently. Many thanks to Federal ICPA for their advocacy for these small remote schools.

To follow on from the Moree conference and how we implement your motions, State Council attended a deputation to Sydney. We were able to meet with the new NSW Deputy Premier and Education Minister Prue Car. Minister Car had been the Shadow Education Minister so she was well aware of our issues and is now in a better position to make the needed changes. This also highlights the need to meet with Shadow Ministers so they can question those in power but then be fully aware of the issues when they find themselves in Government. We arranged 39 meetings with Ministers, Shadow Ministers and other stakeholders, local members and partners.

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.

ICPA is of course an organisation seeking equity of access to education for all students living in rural and remote geographically isolated areas. But what is it that we are seeking? We want to start opportunities early making sure that any children 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.

While advancements in education and technology are making the task of providing an appropriate education easier, these are also some of the forces making it more difficult. The demographic story of remoteness is that populations in remote and regional NSW continue to

decline, and 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 provide resources to metropolitan areas when new schools are needed to cope with population growth. This should not be to the detriment of rural and remote students or cloud the fact that every child, no matter where they live, deserves an appropriate education.

The future of our children is a subject that captivates every parent's mind. Envisioning their lives, careers, and the challenges they might face is a shared concern. As parents and as a community, our responsibility is to equip them adequately for the unfolding future. Central to this preparation is their education – a holistic approach that goes beyond standardised testing, catering to various aspects of their development. ICPA-NSW recognises the need for rural and remote children to have equal access to diverse educational opportunities. In rural and remote areas, the one-size-fits-all approach to education is impractical. The diverse needs of students demand a flexible and multifaceted system. These remote populations and large distances make it impossible for a singular type of schooling to cater to every student. Therefore, the emphasis should be on creating and maintaining pathways for various endeavours so that parents can make informed choices about which educational setting suits their child best.

Acknowledging that a formal education system exists 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, taking into account 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. Monthly meetings with the

Rural Regional and Remote Education Policy Unit within the NSW Department of Education have proven invaluable in addressing longstanding issues and emerging concerns. 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 options 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.

This goes for our boarding partners as well. 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.

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 and properties to run, and 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 to be paid 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 an appropriate education.

Tanya Mitchell

President ICPA-NSW