



**PORTFOLIO NAME: Rural and Remote Schools**

**Portfolio Report**

*DATE: March 2026*

**SIDE**

The School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE), based in Leederville, supports the education of nearly 4,000 students across almost 300 partner schools throughout Western Australia, from Kindergarten to Year 12. SIDE provides an essential service for students who are unable to attend a traditional school setting due to geographical isolation, mental or physical health challenges, or where specific subject programs are not available locally.

In 2025, ICPA WA initiated the SIDE Primary Maths and Science Program for upper primary students in Level 3 regional and remote schools. The program reached 19 small schools and has proven to be an invaluable support. Many of these schools operate multi-age classrooms, sometimes catering for as many as five year levels in one room (for example, Years 2–6). Through this initiative, Year 4–6 students are able to access year-level specific Maths and Science programs delivered by SIDE, while the classroom teacher can concentrate on teaching the younger cohort (Years 2–3).

This model has delivered significant workload reduction for teachers in small, multi-age settings, while also ensuring that regional, rural and remote (RRR) students receive access to specialist subject instruction comparable to their metropolitan peers.

There had been discussion of expanding the program to include HASS and English in 2026; however, to our knowledge, this expansion has not yet occurred.

Paul Mathews, Principal of SIDE, continues to be a strong supporter of ICPA WA. We regularly meet with him during our in-person visits, often when staying at the camp accommodation at SIDE. Jane Cunningham, ICPA WA President, also serves as a SIDE School Board member, ensuring that regional voices are represented and heard wherever possible.

**Fairbridge**

Following the 2018 announcement that Fairbridge Western Australia Incorporated would assume management of the Kalgoorlie Camp School, Pemberton Camp School, Geraldton Camp School, Point Peron Camp School, Bridgetown Camp School, and Dampier Camp School, ICPA WA has remained in regular communication with successive CEOs and relevant Ministers regarding the operation of these facilities.

Unfortunately, in recent years the quality of programs offered, along with general facility maintenance — particularly at Kalgoorlie and Geraldton — has not consistently met community expectations. This has resulted in both sites presenting in an unsatisfactory condition at times and becoming underutilised.

Kalgoorlie School of the Air (Kal SOTA) has used the Kalgoorlie Camp School for decades. The site has been integral to students' in-person learning opportunities and to fostering social connection among SOTA families. However, in recent years the camp has been deemed unsuitable for Kal SOTA's use due to concerns regarding cost, maintenance, and management.

ICPA WA has been very pleased to establish open communication with David Nancarrow, the current CEO of Fairbridge WA. We have appreciated the opportunity to meet with him and are encouraged by the updates and future plans outlined for the Kalgoorlie and Geraldton sites in particular. We look forward to hearing directly from David as he presents at the 54th State Conference.

David brings a background in teaching and boarding environments and has been open and transparent in discussions regarding past challenges, current circumstances, and future direction. When speaking with ICPA WA State Council in February, we were particularly encouraged to hear that “risk-based” activities will continue to form part of the camps' offerings. Planned initiatives include the continuation of sea camps at Dampier, a proposed rock-climbing wall at Kalgoorlie, and the reinstatement of the flying fox at Geraldton — all important elements in delivering engaging, confidence-building outdoor education experiences for regional and remote students.

### **Staffing**

Staffing our RRR schools is an ongoing challenge. That includes, ensuring positions are filled, but also that the teachers are suitably trained and qualified for the positions. In 2024 and 2025 The Department of Education introduced Teacher and Leader Mobility Trials. This was aimed at supporting staffing in regional schools by allowing metropolitan based teachers to work in regional locations for a 3 year period without losing their permanent position.

In February ICPA WA State Council met with Jay Peckitt, Director General; Vicki McKeown, Executive Director Schools; and Karen Roberts, People Services who unfortunately reported that a very minimal number of staff had taken up the opportunity during the mobility trials. Thus debunking the theory that teachers and leaders would move to the regions for a few years with the safety of holding their position in the metropolitan area. Thankfully it was reported that teacher resignations have reduced and there is an increase in the number of graduate teachers.

Did you know that if you are employed by the Department of Education under the Teachers Agreement — including pre-service teachers employed as untrained teachers — you may be able to access paid study leave that can be used for practicum placements?

If you are employed as an Education Assistant or AIEO, you are entitled to up to 200 hours of paid study leave.

This could be a huge bonus for students who may be ineligible for the Commonwealth Prac Payment (CPP).

### **Kindergarten Pilot**

The Full-time Kindergarten Pilot began in February 2026 including South Kalgoorlie Primary School. An additional schools 10 schools will join the pilot in 2027, as yet which schools will be chosen in unclear.

### **Regional Education Strategy**

Twenty months after the announcement of the development of a Department of Education Regional Education Strategy (RES) at the 2024 ICPA WA Annual State Conference—and following extensive consultation—the Regional Education Strategy: A vision for strengthening public education in the regions was released on 6 November 2025.

ICPA WA welcomes the release of the RES and is encouraged by its vision: “for students in the regions to have equitable educational opportunities to achieve their potential and put them on a pathway to a successful future, no matter their geographic location.” This aligns directly with ICPA’s own vision. Likewise, the Director General’s message—“All our students deserve a good education that sets them up for a successful future, regardless of their postcode”—closely echoes the theme of our upcoming 2026 ICPA WA Annual State Conference, Opportunity knows no postcode.

While the strategy represents a positive step forward for regional, rural and remote education in Western Australia, several important areas still require greater focus, particularly inclusion and disability.

Pillar 4: Developing partnerships to create opportunity is a key area where further attention is needed. The opening statement, “Education is a shared responsibility,” reflects a principle ICPA strongly supports—however, true partnership must extend beyond regional collaboration. We urge government to strengthen cross-agency partnerships, particularly between the Departments of Education, Health, Transport, Housing and Agriculture.

Education does not exist in a silo; it is a shared responsibility across all sectors.

I encourage all members to use the link below to access the RES and to review the four pillars that underpin the strategy. Let us use this document to ensure our voices continue to be heard, and that the priorities of regional, rural and remote families remain at the forefront of government planning.

<https://www.education.wa.edu.au/regionaleducationstrategy>

### **VacSwim**

VacSwim continued to be discussed with Peter Lillywhite, the Principal of the School of Swimming and Water Safety at ICPA (WA) face to face meetings throughout the year. It was reported that participation numbers increased during the free VacSwim program period. While this initiative improved access for many families, concerns were raised about high non-attendance rates, with approximately one third of enrolled participants not attending sessions. The Department acknowledged that the free model may reduce accountability and indicated that program structure, pricing and refund processes are currently under review.

A key issue raised by ICPA WA members remains the difficulty rural and remote families experience in securing places in VacSwim programs. Peter confirmed that they are exploring options to introduce a two-phase enrolment process that would allow local families priority

access before bookings open more broadly. While this is acknowledged as an issue, system limitations meant that changes could not be implemented for the 2025 program. The Department has committed to continuing work on this process with the aim of improving access for local communities as soon as possible and will advise ICPA WA of enrolment opening dates so information can be shared with members.

Access to programs in regional and remote areas also continues to be affected by instructor shortages, venue availability, and travel distances for families. Members highlighted cases where no VacSwim venues were available within a 150km radius, as well as situations where local pools were not open during key program periods. Peter welcomed support from communities in promoting instructor opportunities locally to help address staffing shortages.

Peter also provided updates on broader improvements to the School of Swimming and Water Safety program. Work is underway to improve systems, curriculum, and support for schools, including better resources for water safety education and enhanced inclusion for students with disability. Funding has been approved for system upgrades, including improvements to the WAVIS enrolment system, although implementation may take some time.

ICPA WA continues to advocate for improved accessibility, flexibility and communication around VacSwim programs to ensure rural and remote students have equitable opportunities to participate in swimming and water safety education.

### **Teacher Housing Security**

Government Regional Officer Housing (GROH) Program provides accommodation for government employees in regional and remote areas. GROH housing continues to be a challenge to access in many areas and this is having a direct impact on the attraction and retention of teaching staff.

Munglinup Primary School is currently facing a serious staffing crisis that is directly linked to the lack of teacher housing in the town. This issue has been ongoing for many years despite consistent efforts from the local community to work with the Department of Education, Government Regional Officer Housing (GROH), and the Shire of Ravensthorpe to find a solution.

A teacher house had previously been approved, funded, and built for Munglinup, which was specifically sold by the Shire for that purpose. The community was advised that the build was progressing and expected to be delivered. However, the house was later reallocated to another location after Munglinup was deemed a lower priority. This decision was made without consultation with the local community.

The effects of this decision are now being felt very clearly.

There is now a situation where a year 3 student who has attended the school for five years has had 7 different principals and 8 different teachers as they cannot sustain the travel required to work at Munglinup Primary School and reside up to 100km away. These staff members often want to stay, but cannot due to the pressure, cost and safety concerns of travel.

Our children are now the ones who are suffering. Frequent changes in staff mean that teaching approaches, programs, and leadership direction are constantly changing. Students are repeatedly forced to adjust to new teachers and different ways of learning, which can disrupt both their education and wellbeing.

ICPA WA met with both the Director General of Education and the Minister of Education in early February to discuss this issue. Both assured us that they have made it clear to the Department of Housing that the building of a 2<sup>nd</sup> house in Munglinup is a priority, but unfortunately this is all they can do as it now lies with the Department of Housing.

Our small communities are feeling abandoned.

## **ACARA**

In June Jane Cunningham met with Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) CEO Stephen Gniel alongside Pania Turner, President, Western Australian Council of State School Organisations (WACSSO), Julie Brooks, Senior Vice President WACSSO, and Siobhan Allen, Executive Director, Catholic School Parents WA.

Great discussions were held about NAPLAN (not just the testing, but how the data is then used and shared) and curriculum, including the need for further curriculum resources to support multi-age classrooms. Changes to the curriculum were also discussed and in this fast-changing world, technology and AI and the impact of student learning and safety.

## **Closure of Gardiner Primary School**

After 12 months without student enrolments, Gairdner Primary School—the closest school to our family and one that both my husband and sons attended—was officially closed at the end of 2025. The past year has been a sensitive and uncertain time for the local community. The closure of a school is never something a community welcomes, and the process has been difficult for many who have strong connections to the school and its history.

The official closure also raised concerns within the community regarding the future of the school's history, memorabilia and grounds. While a Closure Committee was established (consisting of only 2), the opportunity for community members to participate was not widely or effectively communicated. For those who did become aware of the opportunity but chose not to be involved, this reflects just how difficult and emotional the experience of losing a local school can be for a community.

On a personal level, I was disappointed not to be contacted directly by the Department regarding the closure decision, particularly after I had expressed on multiple occasions my willingness to assist and work constructively with the Department throughout the process. Greater communication and direct engagement with those closely connected to the school would have helped ensure the community felt more included and informed during such a significant transition.

At the February face-to-face State Council meeting with Jay Peckitt and Vicki McKeown, I had the opportunity to share feedback about the community's experience throughout this process. Concerns were raised regarding the lack of clear communication and limited information provided to the community about decisions and processes occurring behind the scenes. It is hoped that lessons from this experience can help inform improved communication and consultation practices for other communities that may face similar circumstances in the future.

ICPA WA has also received notice that the Department of Education will be commencing consultation with the Nungarin community this year regarding their local school. Experiences such as the closure of Gairdner Primary School highlight the importance of clear communication, meaningful community engagement, and sensitive handling of these situations.

No community wants to see its local school close. While a range of factors can contribute to the difficult decision to cease operations, this does not lessen the emotional impact on families and communities. Small schools are often the heart of rural communities, and their absence is deeply felt by those who have learned, worked and gathered there over many years.

**COUNCILLOR NAME:** *Megan Dorrell & Jane Cunningham*

**DATE:** *March 2026*