
Distance Education Report

Madam President, distinguished guests, members of ICPA, ladies and gentlemen. It gives me great pleasure to present my Distance Education report to this conference today

Distance Education has been in the forefront of many families across regional Australia. The ongoing drought and recent bushfires continue to have catastrophic effects on people's livelihoods and livestock and also impacts on education in rural and remote areas. Early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary all fall under the Distance Education banner and all have suffered greatly.

Families have had to make the decision to keep their children home to complete the beginning of their high school years via Distance Education instead of going to boarding school. There have been some reports of some families having to make the heartbreaking decision on which child they can send away to educate. It's not just the farming families but those associated with agricultural industry and the flow on effect to businesses in towns & regional cities.

Due to both parents being required out in the paddock at all sorts of times or working off farm to earn extra income, the continuance of Child Care Subsidy access for these families to enable the children to have the supervision and support of a carer in an otherwise isolated location is vital.

This was one of the many points that NSW State Council took to Sydney in October last year. State Council raised many concerns collated from ICPA members across NSW and it is hoped with continued perseverance that some of these matters will be resolved or at least our city counterparts are now aware of the many issues associated with educating bush children.

Second Computer in the DE Classroom

The issue of supplying a second computer to families through DoE remains an ongoing issue. Distance Education and School of the Air students are expected to spend growing amounts of time on the computer and parents are seeing this as the teachers not teaching the student but relying on the computer-based schooling techniques such as software like Google Classroom to do the teaching. This is especially difficult for families with multistage students in the home school room. For School of the Air Students currently enrolled at Broken Hill SOTA, the timetabling issues are making it very difficult for computers to be used especially if there is more than one child in the school room.

NBN Multicast project

A ten-week trial was due to start at the beginning of Term 3 2019 in cooperation with the Department of Education. A total of five locations were to be trailed with multiple spot beams which it is hoped to have improved the quality of service resulting in more band width to assist a greater number of students. The 2nd education NBN port on computers were also to be tested. This has not made a start as yet but is still hoping to happen in the beginning of 2020.

Graduate Teachers – Practical Training as home tutors/governesses

It is hoped that graduate teachers can use time spent as a home tutor or governess as a recognised part of their practical training. Many families who have more than one student in the home school room may employ a governess. Usually this is an untrained person or backpacker. In supporting graduate teachers to be employed as a home tutor in a distance education school room there are a number of benefits. For the students, they are being supervised by someone who is a graduate teacher. The advantages for the graduate teacher are that they have a full-time job, including full board and keep, they are working in the industry they have trained for, they are gaining experience working in a multistage classroom and would be gaining recognised work experience.

This issue is still being lobbied for and it is hoped that the benefits of recognition will be realised shortly.

Telehealth

State Council had the pleasure visiting the Royal Far West (RFW) while in Sydney. The new facilities are just incredible. Royal Far West can cater for 20 children a month onsite and at the moment they are getting 65-85 referrals a month which means the extra children are going on a waiting list for up to 30 weeks. The “Telecare for kids” program connects country children with the specialist speech, occupational therapy and psychology healthcare they need. Children aged between 3 to 12 years can access consultants through a referral from their local GP or school. This program has so far been delivered to over 1200 children in 110 schools and communities in NSW and QLD.

Royal Far West are tendering for counsellors through the Education dept. for telehealth and are working more closely with the Distance of Education.

A good internet connection is required putting even more emphasis on the need for better satellite connections.

Finigan School Opening

The Official Opening of the Finigan School of Distance Education was held on the 17th November 2019, NSW State Councillors Irene Lund, Shennah Joiner and former Distance Education portfolio holder, Caroline McDonald attended. Caroline, along with Mike Tom, NSW Rural and Remote DoE have been instrumental in seeing this new centre become a reality as part of the consultative group throughout the planning and construction of the centre.

AHWISE report

All reports are that AHWISE is going really well, according to team leader, Lynn French. The placement has been increasing however they are still a bit a bit short on the tutor/student ratio, but they are working on it and continue to try to recruit new tutors and they are building on this.

Last month the rural and remote community sadly said goodbye to an Aussie icon, Brian Egan, the founder of Aussie Helpers and also the person who saw the value of keeping AHWISE alive. Brian passed away in January this year and a large service was held in Charleville. Brian stood down as CEO of Aussie Helpers late 2019 but he can rest assure that Aussie Helpers and AHWISE is going strong in his daughter’s hands who has taken over the reins.

Virtual classroom has had two families enrol so far and both families are ecstatic about the results they have seen in their children.

Lynn reported AHVISE had funding to purchase laptops for students at the end of 2019 where she sent message out to all states in ICPA to send onto their families. That offer has finished now but Lynn is hopeful the offer can be repeated again this year.

I would like to like to thank my fellow State Councillors for all their support over the past three years. I have enjoyed my time immensely and would thoroughly recommend State Council to anyone considering joining. Not only is it great to be part of an amazing team but great to see with perseverance, changes can happen providing a better outcome for rural and remote education.

Skye Bragg
Distance Education convenor

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