

## **FEDERAL PRESIDENT'S REPORT**

### **Alana Moller**

Distinguished guests, Federal Life Members, fellow ICPA members and friends it is with great pleasure and pride that I have the opportunity to present my first Federal President report under the most extraordinary circumstances, not only for ICPA but across our nation and world, regrettably not in person, but nonetheless encouraged by all of you listening today.

Winston Churchill once said, “when we face with a steady eye the difficulties which lie before us we may derive new confidence from remembering those we have already overcome”. As I begin my report and reflect on the past twelve months, this message resonated with me, not only as we continue to face uncertain times in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also as a testament to ICPA and how we have dealt with all that has come before us and all that lies ahead, [perhaps best summed up by our conference theme “learn from the past, build the future”].

Taking on the role of Federal President from the remarkable Wendy Hick in Adelaide last year, I would never have imagined where Federal Council would find ourselves today. Along with myself as the new President, Federal Council welcomed a mixture of experienced Councillors, as well as new faces at the Federal Conference last year, all who have their own strengths, abilities and experiences ensuring that Federal Council can continue to represent our members successfully and effectively.

While the past twelve months seem to have flown by, given what has transpired, it feels as though it may have been much longer. It is very disappointing that we have not been able to physically come together for Conference this year, however with the web conference format, Federal Council has aspired to still provide a platform for our valued members to put forward their stories and points of view, assist us in formulating our policy and have the opportunity to ensure all of you know you are supported. We are a member-based organisation, and it is our members who provide us with the inspiration and motivation to continue our work regardless of circumstances.

Educating our children when we are geographically isolated in the best of times is challenging, whether you have children at early learning, rural schools, distance education students, boarding children or at tertiary and training level and events in the past twelve months have extenuated the already difficult circumstances for our families. Most recently, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have certainly been felt.

From communications through to early childhood, boarding to tertiary and everything in between, ICPA Federal Councillors have been working through a myriad of issues that have arisen during COVID-19 and have been fortunate to have been able to assist members with some of their concerns and issues. It was heartening, to say the least, that out of the crisis have come some exceptional improvements in the area of communications, as well as a recognition of the unique needs of geographically isolated children when it comes to the Assistance for Isolated Children allowance. Unfortunately, though the pandemic has also highlighted and in many instances magnified some of the inequities associated with educating children from geographically isolated contexts at all times, not just during a pandemic and these impacts were felt across all levels of education. While many of these impacts will be expanded upon in individual portfolio reports, all of the obstacles that have arisen for our families and their children have served to reiterate that geographically isolated students are a unique disadvantage group who need specialised and targeted assistance and support to access and attain equitable educational opportunities and outcomes.

The COVID-19 pandemic is so fluid; it is difficult to predict what is ahead; however, ICPA Australia has been and will continue to ensure our geographically isolated students are remembered and supported.

So to now update you on other activities of Federal Council over the past twelve months, apart from the ongoing COVID-19 situation.

After the 2019 Federal Conference in Adelaide, Federal Council set to work immediately to action the motions that were carried at Conference. We have written letters, attended delegations in Canberra, completed submissions, participated in numerous meetings, webinars and other forums and made every effort to ensure our members' concerns and priorities are heard.

Submissions certainly seem to be the favoured method for the government to gain comment and information on topics across many areas and Federal Council feels it is essential that we make comment wherever possible across all sections of interest and concern for our members.

In 2019, Federal Council compiled sixteen submissions and in 2020 already have completed eight submissions on topics from communications and specific needs, early childhood education through to tertiary and most recently submitted comment to the Inquiry Into Education in Remote and Complex Environments Home Learning and Teaching in COVID-19. These submissions have allowed us to mention many aspects of our advocacy, from longstanding issues to current prevalent concerns.

At times it can be problematic keeping abreast of government, departmental and staff changes to be sure of where we need to direct our inquires, requests and correspondence to for the topics which we work on. In February there were changes made to several of the departments we deal with frequently, including the Department of Human Services becoming Services Australia, the Department of Communications and the Arts transferring to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications and the new Department of Education, Skills and Employment. With this change, ICPA Australia also welcomed the appointment of a Minister for Decentralisation and Regional Education, the Honourable Andrew Gee MP. Over the past months since Minister Gee's appointment, we have had the opportunity to work with his office and meet with the Minister via teleconference. We look forward to our continued relationship with the Minister, his staff and the Department. We are also pleased to have Minister Gee addressing Conference on Day Two.

One of the topics which we have raised with Minister Gee's office recently and has been an ongoing focus of our attention is Early Childhood Education and Care and especially In Home Care and the role it plays for geographically isolated families. With many concerns being raised around the impacts of changes to the In Home Care guidelines since the inception of the new program in July 2018, we were pleased that as a direct result of our advocacy the In Home Care transitional provisions around qualification requirements would be extended for remote families until the end of 2021. However, concerns with the program guidelines for remote families have continued to be raised, and the inception of the Relief Childcare Package during the COVID-19 pandemic did nothing to relieve the challenges faced by remote families using In Home Care. It remains to be seen whether a return to the previous system will see any improvements and Federal Council will most certainly be continuing to highlight complexities of the In Home Care system in a remote environment.

Similarly, issues with the Assistance for Isolated Children or AIC have been at the forefront of Federal Council advocacy, from concerns around the eligibility criteria for the allowance through to the application and renewal processes. The original intent of AIC was to assist with alleviating costs associated with educating geographically isolated students, and we have persisted in highlighting the need for AIC to be retained and maintained for these students and their families. We have continued

to call for a review of the allowance to ensure that the scheme is meeting the needs of geographically isolated families, especially with members raising concerns around this. In pursuing the call for a Review, we have reiterated that the current eligibility criteria for the Assistance for Isolated Children should neither be removed nor diminished.

To ensure members and others are aware of our full range of advocacy, we have recently changed the name of the Boarding and School Term Hostels portfolio to Boarding, Hostels and Second Home. This was put in place after concerns were raised that it did not appear as though we supported Second Home families. Although we have always included Second Home families in our advocacy, a simple name change such as this ensures that our members can see that we advocate on their behalf.

In the area of tertiary education, we continued the longstanding advocacy for a Tertiary Access Allowance and were pleased to see the recommendation in the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy Final Report, also known as the Napthine report, for this to be put in place. Federal Council welcomed Minister Tehan's reference to this during our October delegations and were elated to receive news in June that a 'Tertiary Access Payment' would be made available for rural and remote students to access a tertiary education. While further details are still to be released, we are buoyed by this announcement. We will continue to monitor this along with the other tertiary reforms announced recently.

Federal Council has also maintained our commitment to supporting and advocating for all in our community suffering challenges and hardships, continuing to pursue the introduction of a Rural Hardship Education Fund to ensure geographically isolated children can continue their education unhindered at any time of rural hardship. It was encouraging to see our call for a Rural Hardship Education Fund put as a motion in the Senate by Senator Pauline Hanson in October and given unanimous support in the Senate. Federal Council continued to build momentum off this, with contact made with Federal Ministers, Members of Parliament and Senators and media coverage.

Communications continue to be an area of significance. ICPA has been participating in a range of activities associated with ensuring rural and remote communication and the role it plays in geographically isolated education is recognised and always considered. In what is a tremendous opportunity for ICPA Australia, we have recently been appointed to the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman, TIO for short, Consumer Panel, allowing us a direct voice on rural and remote education in the communications sphere.

ICPA Australia also maintains relationships with other individuals and groups to enhance our advocacy. We have continued to connect with organisations such as the National Farmers Federation and other agricultural groups, Dolly's Dream, the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA), the Outback Alliance, the Better Internet for Rural, Regional and Remote Australia team (BIRRR) Telstra, the Australian Curriculum Assessment & Reporting Authority (ACARA), the National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA), the National Broadband Network (NBN) and the Primary Industries Education Foundation Australia (PIEFA) to name a few. We feel privileged to have positive relationships with all of these organisations and others and thank them for their interest in and support of ICPA. It has been especially useful to work with these organisations to be able to raise our specific priorities, such as during the recent Outback Alliance webinar series which I was grateful to participate in.

Federal Council sincerely appreciates the support of other organisations, and with that in mind, I would like to acknowledge our sponsors for the 2020 Conference, Telstra, the Australian Boarding Schools Association, the Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Philmac, and S. Kidman & Co Pty Ltd. ICPA Australia also feels so fortunate to have recently been approached by the McDonald Family and the Four Seasons Company, owned by the Olsson family with the generous gesture of ICPA

being a beneficiary of a percentage of the sales from ZM nutrition blocks for cattle released in honour of beef industry leader, the late Zanda McDonald. It is with a great sense of pride and humility that we are a part of this initiative. Zanda's family are longstanding supporters and volunteers for ICPA and geographically isolated children. I would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of Federal Council, to express our humblest gratitude and appreciation to the McDonald and Olsson families.

In the past twelve months, Federal Council has also been working closely and cooperatively with state councils across Australia, most recently through the COVID-19 pandemic, but also in a number of other areas. In February, representatives from all State Councils met with Federal Secretary Suzanne Wilson and myself in Melbourne for face-to-face joint council meetings. It is disappointing that this is likely to have been the last opportunity to meet with Tasmania State Council, as a vote was carried by Tasmanian members in late July to dissolve their state council, due to volunteer numbers dwindling to unsustainably low levels. ICPA will, however, continue to support Tasmania and maintain our presence amongst our members there. All Councils have been focussed on working together this year on the development of a new look ICPA website which will hopefully meet members' and ICPA's needs better. The development of this website is well underway, and we look forward to releasing a dynamic new online experience for our members and supporters. I think I speak on behalf of all ICPA Councils when I say that it is imperative that we seek to maintain common ground and support each other across all of Australia and Joint Council meetings are an effective way of facilitating our collective efforts. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and congratulate all State Councils for their continued hard work and determination in advocating for our children. It has been immense privilege this year to have worked with you all. In the words of Helen Keller, "Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much".

ICPA Australia is a member-based organisation, and anything that we can do to assist our members and their families is at the forefront of our mind. We welcome any contact from our members. Our membership base is strong, and it is important that we recognise that ICPA would not be what it is today without our grassroots members. ICPA supports students, where they cannot access equitable education because of geographical isolation, from early childhood and rural schools through to tertiary, no matter what type of schooling they undertake.

Federal Council is acutely aware that the past twelve months have been challenging for many of our members and Federal Councillors are not immune to these pressures and personal tribulations. Due to their extenuating personal circumstances, three Councillors have had to stand down from Council since the 2019 Conference. I wish to take this opportunity to thank and acknowledge those Councillors for the time and commitment they have given to Federal Council.

It has been a big year for Federal Council and for those of us who have been learning our roles, we have been so very lucky to have longstanding Councillors to guide and teach us, as well as all those who have continued to support and guide us this past twelve months. As well as the changes that came at the 2019 Federal Conference, in the past twelve months we have welcomed Jo Camilleri into the Publicity Officer role, taking the position on from Nikki Macqueen and we were very pleased to co-opt Nikki Mahony from the Dawson Valley Branch in Queensland onto Federal Council in May.

If I may take the time now to make a personal note to express my gratitude to all of Federal Council for their support, encouragement, hard work, determination, collaboration and genuine care for myself, each other and I can assure you all of our members, but especially to several members of Federal Council, you know who you are, who have been solid rocks in my foundations this past year. I would also be remiss to not show individual gratitude to Wendy Hick for her on ongoing guidance and support for myself; she has certainly dealt with some curly questions from me in her always impeccable and rational way! I also would like to thank those former Councillors who have assisted

me in the past twelve months. I also wish to acknowledge all past ICPA volunteers and offer my thoughts and prayers to the families of those we have lost this year.

And one more thank you and perhaps the most important, to my husband Scott and my three daughters who through a sometimes chaotic year have come out the other end, still on my side and my biggest supporters and helpers, two of my daughters even joining us during conference to help everything run as smoothly as possible.

Well there is not too much more left to be said so let us now move on in our first-ever web conference. I would like to thank all of you for supporting us as we have embarked on the immense task of conducting Conference in this format and a special thankyou to the Australian Boarding Schools Association and Townsville Grammar School for allowing use of their facilities for Conference to be presented from and to the families of other councillors who are coming to you from their homes. While we aim to ensure the Conference runs as smoothly and precisely as possible, I do request that attendees bear with us and understand that we may face some problems over the next two days as we work in this new and untested format. Most of all I would like to say that this is an opportunity to hear from a group of likeminded people who understand exactly what you face as the parents of isolated children because they are most often in the same boat. We are all here to support each other, and this is no more obvious than when we come together at Conference, whether face to face or virtual, because as I have said before, being isolated should not mean you are alone.