

## ICPA Federal Conference 2019

31 July, 2019

### Why ICPA is as Necessary as Ever after 48 Years

The request by our President to say a few words to you at this, the 48th Federal Conference of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association, to compare the economic and social conditions of today with those which prevailed at the time ICPA was inaugurated in 1971, has meant that I have spent many hours rereading many copies of Newsletters, Pedals, Conference Minutes and other documents that I have accumulated over the years since I became a member of ICPA. My reading made me not only note the similarities between then and now, but emphasised for me that ICPA is as necessary today as it has ever been.

I am very proud to be a Life Member of Cloncurry Branch, which I joined in 1980, but I actually became a member of ICPA 46 years ago – when we formed the Augathella branch on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1973. I became its first President with absolutely no experience but considerable enthusiasm. This was only two years after the initial meeting in Bourke on 16/4/71 when ICPA was formed but there were already more than 70 branches across Australia and State Councils had been formed in most States.

The explosion of interest and commitment in those days before the internet and reliable telephones was extraordinary but reflected the depth of concern that people across rural Australia had about what the future held for their children. It was becoming apparent that in a changing world education would be a key factor in the choices that children would need to make about their futures. The wool boom of the 1950s was long gone, drought and poor commodity prices were huge constraints on people's ability to provide it.

This all sounds strikingly similar to conditions prevailing in many parts of Australia today where the threat of artificial intelligence reducing employment opportunities and constantly fluctuating commodity prices combine with the ongoing battle with 'drought and flooding rains' to quote Dorothea Mackellar, put enormous pressure on parents wanting to provide the best opportunities for their children.

The policy battles fought by ICPA then and since, have had some outstanding successes, some failures and others have seemingly become wars of attrition.

The ongoing need for ICPA to still be in there fighting for the future of our children is epitomised in the history of the initial policy for which the Association lobbied to help achieve the objective for which it was founded which is to "lessen the degree of inequality of educational access between geographically isolated and non-isolated children".

This policy was to achieve 'the payment of a Living Away from Home Allowance equal to the cost of gaining access to continuing primary or secondary education'.

The first huge success was the rapid introduction of the Assistance to Isolated Children's Scheme which was implemented by the Federal Government in 1973, less than two years after the formation of ICPA and in direct response to ICPA's initial objective to 'obtain government assistance for children who do not have daily access to an appropriate school'. This was achieved thanks to the magnificent work of the founding members in several states who demonstrated great skill in using the media (particularly radio) to put the case for change. They worked with both State and Federal politicians to get them to recognise the inequality of access between urban and isolated children in a country where education is compulsory and supposedly free.

However, it has been an ongoing struggle ever since to maintain this recognition and to keep the value of the allowances relevant. This was brought home to me yet again, when I noted the similarity between Agenda item 1 at the first Federal Conference I ever attended, which was the 4<sup>th</sup> Federal Conference, held in Charleville in 1975, and Agenda item 1 at this, the 48<sup>th</sup> Federal Conference in 2019. The 1975 motion from

Cunnamulla Branch reads “In view of the fact that boarding fees have doubled since 1970, thus preventing many children from continuing schooling, that Isolated Children’s Allowances should be extended substantially”. The 2019 motion A1 from the Pilbara Branch (WA) is “That ICPA (Aust) continues to lobby both the Minister for Families and Social Services and the Minister for Education for a substantial increase to the Assistance to Isolated Children(AIC) Basic Boarding Allowance to take into account the ever-increasing gap between the allowance and the true cost of boarding”. There are a number of similar motions on both agendas and on many of the agendas in the intervening years.

I know I made this same point when I opened the 43<sup>rd</sup> ICPA Queensland Conference in Townsville in 2014. I noted then, the similarity between conference motions in 1975 and 2014 but annual Presidents’ reports, reports of trips to Canberra, meetings with ministers and bureaucrats from intervening years are filled with the efforts made by successive executives to ensure the value of the scheme. Sometimes thanks are recorded for upgrades and improvements but obviously this is a battle we have not won and must continue to fight. The situation is exacerbated today by the fact that the scheme is able to be accessed by families other than the geographically isolated which means the available funds are spread much thinner.

Achieving the introduction of the AIC Scheme was a good start but only the beginning. ICPA continued to draw attention to the inequities and other difficulties faced by families living in the bush and over the next 10 to 15 years education and related issues in rural and regional Australia became the subject for innumerable enquiries, studies and reports from a Senate Standing Committee, several Commonwealth Schools Commission reports and State Government enquiries to those by university faculties, education departments and independent and church school authorities. ICPA was always consulted and we spent a lot of time serving on committees, preparing submissions and responding to reports.

All this gradually bore fruit and we saw huge improvements to existing services and the introduction of new ones such as Special Education Units, Kindergarten and Pre-School programs. Distance Education, which evolved from the old Correspondence Schools and Schools of the Air, became such an effective means of education that I now have concerns that the interests of the Geographically Isolated students for whom the system was developed are in danger of being marginalised by the interests of the increasing numbers of non GI students now using the system.

Communications have been a major interest since the earliest times – largely because of their poor quality or complete lack of anything other than a slow mail service. ICPA was actively involved with the planning for the first Australian satellite - Aussat. The School of the Air by satellite trial conducted out of the Mt. Isa SOTA in 1986-87 had a far reaching influence on the delivery of Distance Education.

By working closely with educators as well as government we have been able to achieve a lot in fields such as curriculum, special education, teacher education and others.

Some issues were pursued for many, many years before being ultimately successful. The bypassing of an inappropriate school to be able to receive living away from home allowances is one that springs to mind. It recurred on conference agendas for at least twenty years before it was finally accepted by government.

Taxation is a policy area in which little headway has been made even though ‘The alleviation of some of the educational costs incurred through isolation by taxation concessions or rebates’ was one of the very early aims of ICPA. There were 7 motions on tax on the 1975 agenda and I note there are two on the 2019 Agenda – Item A12 from Westmar-Inglestone Branch (Qld) ‘that ICPA(Aust) lobbies the relevant minister to support employers wishing to assist with education expenses of children of employees who reside in geographically isolated areas, those eligible for current Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) funding, by removing the Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) on this assistance’ and Item A13 from the Kimberley Air Branch (WA) “that ICPA (Aust) lobbies the Federal Government to provide for boarding fees to be a tax deductible expense for remote Australian families that are eligible for Assistance to Isolated Children”. There have been many similar ones in the intervening years.

I am aware that over the years because of constant knock backs this policy area has not been pursued as vigorously as others but I would like to say to you as committed members - If this issue, is one you feel is fair

and not asking for more than other Australians receive I encourage you to keep pursuing it. Do not be discouraged. This applies to any issues that may arise that you and your branches believe 'will help lessen the degree of inequality of educational access between geographically isolated and non-isolated children' – the founding principle of ICPA in 1971 and still crucial today.

I know what busy lives you all lead and thank you for taking the time to be here supporting the interests of our children and communities. I would like to conclude by reading you a poem written by Judy Jakins from Bourke, our first Federal Treasurer, because the sentiments included are mine too and have kept me involved with ICPA for the past 46 years. It was.

ICPA

One step won't take us very far,

We've got to keep on walking

One word won't tell 'em who we are,

We've got to keep on talking.

An inch won't make us very tall,

We've got to keep on growing.

One Canberra trip won't do it all,

We've got to keep on going.

A constant drip of water  
Wears away the hardest stone.

But sitting on our backsides  
Won't pay the telephone!!

So if you do not help us  
Then the job will not get done.

We must have lots more members  
If the battle's to be won!!

Patricia Mitchell OAM  
Patron ICPA Qld Inc