

**ISOLATED CHILDREN'S PARENTS' ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA**  
**49<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL FEDERAL CONFERENCE**  
**HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AC**  
**GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA**  
**WEDNESDAY 5<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST 2020 (web conference)**

Thank you so much for inviting me to open the 49th ICPA Federal Conference.

I begin by paying my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land: the palawa people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community, who have survived invasion and dispossession, and yet who continue to maintain their identity, culture and Indigenous rights.

Can I also acknowledge the Honourable Vicki O'Halloran AO, Administrator of the Northern Territory and Patron of the Isolated Children's Parents Association Northern Territory Branch.

I am sorry that you are not all here in Tasmania meeting face-to-face. If you were, you would be looking out a refreshingly chilly Hobart with kunanyi-Mount Wellington blanketed in snow. The snow has in fact caused a number of school closures today including country schools in Bothwell, Campbell Town, Oatlands, Franklin and Lilydale.

In preparing for this opening I have looked with interest at your ICPA website to gain a better understanding of the activities and advocacy role of ICPA. In the Tasmanian section, I read the report of the Tasmanian President, Emily Gardner to the National Conference a few years ago and was surprised to learn that at the state conference you were "entertained" by my daughter Meg, who sang and talked about her experiences of rural life as a child and a dairy farmer's wife. I am sorry to say I won't be nearly as entertaining as Meg.

I want to start with two quotes:

Education and training plays a critical role in building the social fabric of communities, but also in developing social capital for economic prosperity.

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Education, perhaps more than anything, is the passport to a better life.

The first quote is from Dr John Halsey's Final Report of the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education, published in 2018, which I understand the Australian Government responded to later that year.

The second is a quote from Peter Underwood, my predecessor as Governor of Tasmania, and it summarises the vision of the Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment, for which I chair the Advisory Committee.

I will touch on each of these: the Halsey Report and the Peter Underwood Centre.

The Halsey Report begins with differences in educational achievement reminding us that the outcomes for RRR students have in the main lagged behind urban students for decades as exemplified by NAPLAN, Year 12 completion and transition to University. From major cities, to inner regional, outer regional, and remote locations, there is decreasing attainment with increasing remoteness. For successful completion of Year 12 or Cert III by age 19, for example, there is a decline from 78% for major cities to 43% for Very Remote.

It occurred to me that one of the things that is masked by mean scale scores in measures such as NAPLAN is the diversity of attainment or distribution of students in achievement bands. In some schools there is a wide range of attainment within a particular age group which presents particular challenges for teachers. This is a feature which is more common in rural, regional and remote schools which often have a cross-section of SES families. In speaking to a Primary School Maths and Science teacher in a regional semi-rural school here in Tasmania, I heard that he needed to prepare five lesson plans for each Maths class to cater for the diversity of children in the class – with some students years ahead in attainment and others years behind. And I did wonder how many teachers are equipped to do this effectively to keep all students engaged and achieving their potential.

The Halsey Report has many recommendations and I cannot do them all justice in this opening speech. Two of the priorities include addressing the patchiness of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in RRR communities. I'm sure we would all agree with Professor Halsey that ICT will only grow to be more integral to education and life-long learning. Let us hope that Covid-19 will have a long-term effect of improving ICT access in RRR communities as schools and

education departments are forced to embrace the technology during lockdowns to a much greater extent than before.

Covid-19 has made us face-up to the inequality of ICT access and devise ways to overcome this for lower SES groups. Home-schooling during the lockdown has confronted us with the fact while mobile phones are ubiquitous, some families, including those in metropolitan areas do not have reliable internet access. I have read that one Queensland school in a metropolitan area estimated that 60% of families did not have regular internet access.

Efforts to confront the digital divide highlighted by Covid-19 should have a flow-on effect on RRR communities. Clearly this was an area of concern and advocacy for ICPA long before the pandemic when an independent RRR Communications Help/Service Hub was suggested to assist with troubleshooting, identifying suitable products for situations and areas, and providing technology upskilling to enable those living in rural and remote areas to fully utilise available communications.

I can see from the motions in the agenda for your meeting that communications and the internet feature prominently and there are motions, for example, to continue the unmetering of data beyond the Covid-19 arrangements, which I understand end on 30 September. As the explanation for one of the motions stated, "Internet woes are always high on the agenda for ICPA members".

Professor Halsey's fourth priority, to quote:

... focuses directly on transitioning into and out of school. There is still work that needs to be done to ensure all young children start school healthy and well prepared. As well, work needs to be done to drastically shorten the time it takes to have a child with a potential learning difficulty properly assessed and a specific program designed for them.

Ensuring young children start school healthy and well prepared and the issue of assessments and programs for children with learning differences were goals which resonated with me it. I want to say something about the first. It is the goal of the "Channel Basics", one of the projects that is being supported by the Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment, to which I have already referred.

It is known that 80% of brain development occurs in the first three years of life. Research has shown that reading to babies as young as 6 months of age leads to larger vocabularies and better early literacy skills four years later, just as a child is getting ready for school. “Even though children may not be talking yet, that doesn’t mean they are not learning.”<sup>1</sup> How often (quantity) and how vividly (quality) toddlers and adults engage in books together is related to early reading and writing skills.

And children’s literacy skills when they start school correlate to later reading success. These findings fit in with what we know about early language development. Reading aloud is a form of conversation and conversing with children is important.

In 2018, two teachers from Margate School in Tasmania attended a course at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in Boston and learnt about a program called the Boston Basics. The Boston Basics are five evidence-based care-giving principles that encompass much of what experts find is important for children from birth to age three. The tenet is that every child from every background can benefit from the five principles. They embody simple messages that can be adopted by the whole community and publicised through posters in prominent places, on buses, with videos and so on.

The messages are:

- Maximise love, manage stress
- Talk, sing and point
- Count, group and compare
- Explore through movement and play
- Read and discuss stories.

The teachers, Kate Slater and Maree Thompson, were inspired to introduce this program to their district in the light of 2018 data for the area showing that an increasing proportion of children were starting school with developmental delays and developmental vulnerability, and that, according to PIPS (Performance Indicators in Primary Schools) data there were increases in the proportion of children achieving below the expected grade level in reading. It is also of concern that the gap between Tasmania and Australia in terms of the

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Cates, cited by Lydia Denworth, “The Magic of Reading Aloud to Babies”, *Psychology Today*, 5 May 2017.

percentage of at-risk and vulnerable children on the language and cognitive skills domain is widening.<sup>2</sup>

The Basics (Tasmania) has attracted AEDC (Australian Early Development Census) funding and with a steering committee and partnerships with the Underwood Centre and the Department of Education, was launched in December. It is described as a “collective impact project” designed to ensure that the community (the local community in the channel including Bruny Island and the wider community) understand the critical importance of the basics for a child’s development in the first three years of life. It has produced posters, handouts and videos all directed at reinforcing and explaining this message to everyone who has contact with children and their families.

This seems to be such a promising pilot with a strong evidence base. It may well be a project of interest to ICPA as an organisation which has such strong roots in local communities. You can access the materials online: <https://www.thebasicstasmania.com/about>

I promised to tell you a little bit more about the Peter Underwood Centre for educational attainment. The centre is a partnership between the University and the State Government, with the Governor having a role as the Chair of the Centre’s Advisory Committee. This is a role which I have very much enjoyed. The focus of the centre is on research partnerships and initiatives that contribute to a positive and sustained change in educational outcomes for children and you people.

An example of the Centre’s research is the report completed by the Centre, “*Learning at home during COVID-19: Effects on vulnerable young Tasmanians*”, published in April. This report has a chapter (chapter 4), ‘New ways of learning in the COVID-19 era’, which elaborates on the issues of online learning I spoke of earlier – explaining for me the Australian Digital Inclusion Index with its three elements of access, affordability and digital ability – the latter element highlighting that computers and internet are not enough for digital inclusion. The report notes the steep learning curve that was required to bring all staff up

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Underwood Centre, ‘Early Childhood Development’ Fact Sheet (2019), [https://www.utas.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/1263572/Underwood-Centre-Fact-Sheet-One.pdf](https://www.utas.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1263572/Underwood-Centre-Fact-Sheet-One.pdf)  
[https://www.utas.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/1263572/Underwood-Centre-Fact-Sheet-One.pdf](https://www.utas.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1263572/Underwood-Centre-Fact-Sheet-One.pdf) accessed 4 November 2019.

to speed with CANVAS and emphasises the time and resources needed for designing quality online materials for primary and secondary students.

UCTV Alive for Kids is a new engagement program developed by the Peter Underwood Centre to provide children and young people (9-13yrs) with fun, homebased extra-curricular learning opportunities.

As a response to children learning from home the Underwood Centre put together this 9-part series of interactive broadcasts for children. Topics delivered ranged from Handfish, volcanoes, sea birds, waste plastics to a tour of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery's "This Too Shall Pass".

The technical solutions developed for UCTV Alive will be utilized to deliver a 5-part Science Week program this month.

I started with acknowledging the traditional owners of lutrawita, Tasmania. As Governor of Tasmania, I mourn the fact that there are no living descendants of the muwinina people, who lived where I now live in Hobart, and that there are no living descendants of many of the other Tasmanian Aboriginal tribal groups.

But we can also rejoice in the resilience of the descendants of Mannalargenna and the North East Nation, who have ensured that we have a thriving Tasmanian Aboriginal community and that our island of Tasmania is enriched by their continuing survival. Through them Aboriginal culture is being revived and celebrated. Through initiatives such the Education Department-funded project, the Orb, a wonderful online media resource designed to assist the teaching of Aboriginal histories and culture as a living culture informed by the past but evolving is one of the many local initiatives designed to bury the extinction myth and the concept of Tasmania having only a 200 year history.

Yesterday I attended a screening of a new episode of the animated television programme, "Little J and Big Cuz", which is about a couple of Indigenous Australian kids with episodes such as "Goanna Ate My Homework". This new episode, 'Pilot Bird' is in palawa kani, a revived Tasmanian Aboriginal language, and it's the second episode to be recorded in palawa kani. It was wonderful to meet the caste whose voices were recorded for the episode. The series comes with impressive educational resources attached to each episode.

Thank you for inviting me to open your conference and I wish you every success with it. I can see from the agenda that you have many interesting issues to discuss.