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Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs
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Dear Committee Secretary

Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students -

I understand that the Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs is presently inquiring into and reporting on key aspects of educational opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students up to school leaving age. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

The provision of boarding school education and its outcomes

I note that the inquiry's Terms of Reference includes investigating the provision of boarding school education and its outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

As you may be aware, AIEF aims to raise \$140 million to provide boarding school scholarships for Indigenous children to attend some of the leading schools in the country, coupled with a Pathways Program to work with Indigenous students to create, identify, coordinate and facilitate pathways to sustainable, long-term careers after they complete Year 12 at one of our partner schools.

I attach here a copy of our recently released *AIEF Compendium of best practice for achieving successful outcomes with Indigenous students in Australian boarding schools*. The *AIEF Compendium* was launched earlier this year, and identifies the approaches, practices and processes that contribute to success in educating Indigenous students at leading boarding schools in Australia. The *AIEF Compendium* draws heavily on the information, examples, and opinions shared by practitioners at 51 Australian boarding schools who work with Indigenous students. As such, I believe it will provide useful information and perspectives about the provision of boarding school education for Indigenous students in this country. I have also referenced some of its findings in sections below.

When examining models for delivering boarding school programs, I draw your attention to the success of AIEF, its partner schools and the students who have received an AIEF scholarship.

In AIEF's most recent reporting year (2014), AIEF scholarship students achieved a 92% retention and Year 12 completion rate, and 93% of our Year 12 graduates were productively engaged in pursuits like university study or full time employment – with the remainder being actively supported and case managed into productive careers. This is a model that is achieving successful education, employment and career outcomes for Indigenous young people.



AIEF currently offers over 500 scholarship places per annum and there is demand from suitable students and high quality boarding schools to take this to 1,000 students per annum. I know that boarding school will not suit every Indigenous child or family, but for those that it does suit, places could be increased to that level relatively quickly and easily if funds were available as the AIEF model was designed with scalability as one of its most important features.

Engagement and achievement of students in remote areas

In 2014, AIEF supported students from a record 233 communities in every state and territory of Australia, with 38% of students coming from remote and very remote communities, 46% from rural and regional communities and 16% from metropolitan communities.

With an over 90% retention and Year 12 completion rate for AIEF scholarship students, the AIEF Scholarship Program has supported 230 secondary and tertiary graduates since 2008 – many of whom have been from remote and very remote communities.

Best practice models, both domestically and internationally

I note that the Committee is keen to establish what constitutes best practice when it comes to educational opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

AIEF's program has the highest rate of success in getting kids to complete school and transition to university or a real job; it draws upon private sector funds to reduce the cost to government; it has the lowest operating costs in the country; it is scalable, it has a long-term focus with a viable and sustainable business model; and it is supported by the most influential leaders from business, government, Indigenous leaders and the community at large.

AIEF is proven, effective and efficient, but we cannot keep up with demand for more scholarship places and with further government investment which we will match from the private sector, AIEF could support thousands more Indigenous children to have a productive and happy future.

AIEF was developed as a 50/50 joint venture between the Australian Government and the private sector, but private sector investment has outstripped Australian Government investment since 2013.

Comparisons of school models in the transition to further education and employment outcomes.

As previously stated, 93% of our Year 12 graduates are either actively engaged in study or employment – with the remainder being actively supported and case managed into productive careers. This is a model that is achieving successful education and ultimately employment and career outcomes for indigenous young people.

We have been running the *AIEF Pathways Program* since 2010 and in that time we have developed two essential programs to equip students with the best chance of successfully transitioning to a sustainable career once they complete Year 12. These are detailed below for your information.

One-on-one Student Career Transition Support – We provide individual one-on-one case management for students in Years 11, 12 and beyond which includes identifying and



discussing career options and developing individual career plans; assisting students develop a resume and providing support for interviews; assisting students to obtain references, a Tax File Number and bank account; assisting students with employment applications and interviews; liaising with tertiary institutions and employers to secure opportunities for students; providing any other career development support that is needed to support their individual career transition from school to further study or employment; and ongoing monitoring, support and tracking.

One-on-one Mentoring – We provide students with individual, one-on-one, personal and career mentoring with regular face-to-face sessions. The *AIEF Mentoring Program* involves matching each participating Indigenous student with an experienced and professional adult with a successful career to share knowledge and experience and offer a student guidance and support about life and career options. The intention is for mentors to develop lasting and ongoing relationships of trust with students and these relationships continue after finishing school and into adulthood.

The *AIEF Pathways Program* prepares students for post-school pathways by assisting them with personal and professional skill development; supports students by connecting them to support networks and providing one-on-one transition support; and monitors and tracks students after they complete Year 12, providing tailored and targeted ongoing support as required.

Our staff work closely with school staff to ensure that students successfully transition to further education or employment following their graduation from Year 12.

Recommendations

When determining recommendations to maximise the educational engagement and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:

1. It is important that Indigenous families have educational choice.

Every effort should be made to ensure that Indigenous children have quality schooling available in their home communities. Where families wish for their children to attend high quality boarding schools away from their home communities, they should not be denied these opportunities simply due to financial constraints. Boarding is certainly not suitable for every child, however the *AIEF Compendium* found that for enthusiastic students, the boarding experience can offer:

- access to high-quality secondary education, which might be unavailable in some students' home communities;
- a safe, consistent and stable living environment;
- a warm and caring familial environment with house parents / boarding supervisors and peers;
- clear boundaries, set routines, discipline and structure;
- access to nutritious and regular meals;
- access to professionals such as school nurses and school counsellors, where needed;



- a strong and enduring support network among students, teachers and alumni from a broad and diverse range of backgrounds that students may otherwise not be exposed to;
- opportunities to be involved with extra-curricular activities including music, drama, sports, etc.; and
- homework supervision and access to tutoring where needed.

2. We should be clear about what we mean by “educational attainment”.

A term that is frequently used is “educational attainment” but we need to be clear about what we mean. School attendance is not an educational “outcome” but rather a vital input towards the achievement of educational attainment. Parents don’t believe the purpose of the education system is for their children to “show up” at school. While school attendance is necessary to facilitate educational outcomes we need to ensure that the definition of educational success and the outcome we are working towards is to lift educational attainment more broadly. If we don’t define success correctly it’s hard to achieve it.

Educational attainment should be defined as an objective and measurable outcome in its own right such as achieving Year 12 completion and/or a measureable increase in the academic skills of a student in literacy or numeracy.

For the purposes of *AIEF’s Compendium*, a successful outcome is defined as “Year 12 completion and a successful transition to a sustainable career”.

The range of methods to achieve “educational attainment” may be different at each school depending on factors such as the existing level of achievement within the school, community engagement, social and economic issues in the community. Stakeholders should work together to identify and negotiate what success looks like and how it will be measured. Once we are clear about what outcomes we are seeking to achieve, it is important to have a plan that allows educators to achieve it.

3. It is essential for Indigenous young people to be actively supported and mentored in their career planning as early as possible, ideally through secondary school.

By focussing resources and efforts on Indigenous young people we will be avoiding the continuation of generational problems in years to come. Indigenous students should be provided with one-on-one career transition support, coupled with one-on-one mentoring with successful adults whilst they are still at secondary school.

The *AIEF Compendium* found that successful mentor programs for Indigenous students have the following features:

- long-term mentoring relationships – ideally these relationships continue as students make the transition from school to life after school;
- mature mentors with real-life experience and career achievements;
- mentors matched with students based on common interests and mutual respect; and
- consistent, regular contact between mentors and students.



AIEF's *Pathways Program* is a successful, proven model for student career support and mentoring.

4. Support for Indigenous young people should continue seamlessly post-school.

The *AIEF Compendium* found that almost no participating schools have a formalised, in-house, targeted program to assist Indigenous students after Year 12. This is likely true of most schools throughout Australia. Indigenous students largely rely on the same supports offered to students in the broader school community – predominantly access to a careers advisor tasked with assisting the entire cohort of students in their senior years.

Whilst some schools maintain contact with some students on an ad hoc basis, it is clear that most Indigenous students would benefit from a systematic approach to transition management and a formalised program of post-school support (for example, the way the *AIEF Pathways Program* does this).

It is also essential that any programs engaged to work with students do not leave them in limbo at critical transition periods. It is practically impossible for new and unfamiliar programs to “pick up” students in these transitional periods.

Any support offered to Indigenous students by way of transition support and mentoring must flow seamlessly from secondary school to post-school. Again, AIEF's *Pathways Program* demonstrates how successful student career support and mentoring can be delivered.

5. Indigenous students' outcomes should be tracked and monitored post-school.

Indigenous graduates' outcomes and destinations should be tracked post-school to ensure that we have the data needed to determine what support needs to be provided at school and beyond to facilitate successful student outcomes. This requires that schools or funded organisations be in regular contact with students – ideally offering support where needed.

The tracking, monitoring and follow up support undertaken by AIEF through its *Pathways Program* represents best practice in this space.

6. We would strongly recommend prioritising government funding for programs with proven, unambiguous results.

Where government funding is provided to an organisation to achieve outcomes with Indigenous young people, there should be a public register recording quantitative and qualitative outcomes achieved by recipient organisations. This would show for instance how much funding an organisation received, what outcomes that funding is intended to achieve, and the results that were actually achieved each year. This would bring a much greater level of transparency and accountability to a sector that has for too long been opaque and unaccountable. This lack of transparency and accountability has resulted in wasted funds and allowed inefficient and ineffective organisations to continue operating.

7. Funding should be clearly linked to program outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

There should be a transition to a 100 per cent success-based retrospective funding model in this sector where the government simply pays an agreed sum when an outcome is achieved. If



a government only pays when an outcome is achieved and otherwise pays nothing, it would quickly limit wastage of government funds.

8. **Funding should be focussed on organisations that are not entirely dependent on government funding, and who can demonstrate they also have financial support from others.**

Non-profit organisations relying on full government funding are not sustainable and if they are going to achieve their mission to end Indigenous disparity they need to diversify their funding sources. At the same time, if an organisation is funded half from the private sector and half from government, this is better value for money for the taxpayer because it makes it half price for them. It also means that government funding is leveraged so it can stretch further to support even more programs and organisations delivering real outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Government on initiating this inquiry. Thank you for providing the opportunity to comment and we would be happy to participate in any further discussion or clarification.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Pentfold AM
Executive Director

Enc: *AIEF Compendium of best practice for achieving successful outcomes with Indigenous students in Australian boarding schools.*