

**SUBMISSION: HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS -  
INQUIRY INTO EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER  
STUDENTS**

## Introduction

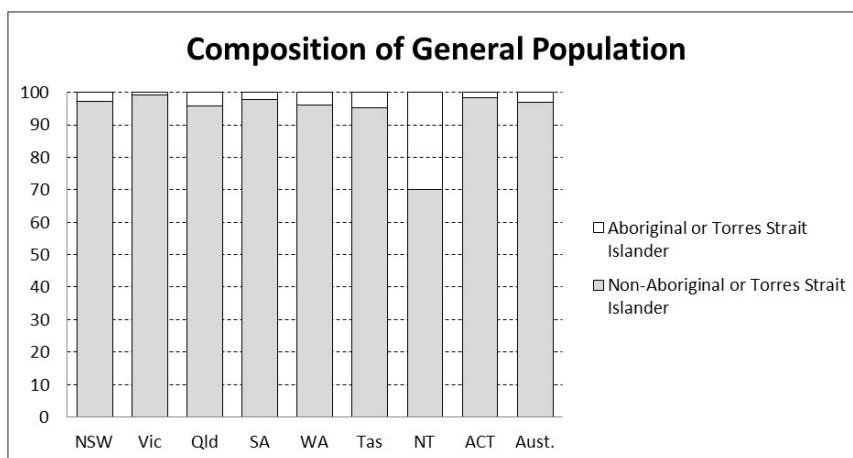
IEUA-QNT welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs' Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students.

IEUA-QNT is an industry union representing ~18,000 teachers, support staff and ancillary staff in non-government education institutions in Queensland and The Northern Territory and regularly participates in education and industrial debate through a system of committees comprised of members and union officers.

The area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education is one of particular relevance to our union.

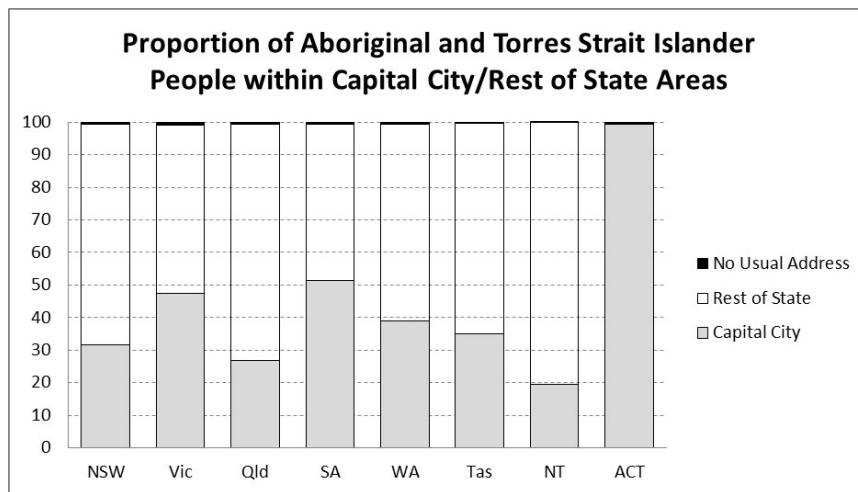
Data from the most recent Australian census in 2011 indicates that the Northern Territory (29.8%), Tasmania (4.7%) and Queensland (4.2%) have the highest proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Figure 1) of all Australian jurisdictions [1]. Further, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland and The Northern Territory are more likely to reside outside of the capital city (Figure 2) than those in other states and territories [2].

With regard to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, census results indicate that individuals in The Northern Territory are more likely to attend non-government schools (Figure 3) than students in all other jurisdictions, except The Australian Capital Territory [3]. This is despite the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in The Northern Territory are less likely to be engaged in schooling (Figure 4) than in any other state or territory. In contrast, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Queensland (Figure 4) are more likely to be engaged in schooling than their peers in New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania [3].



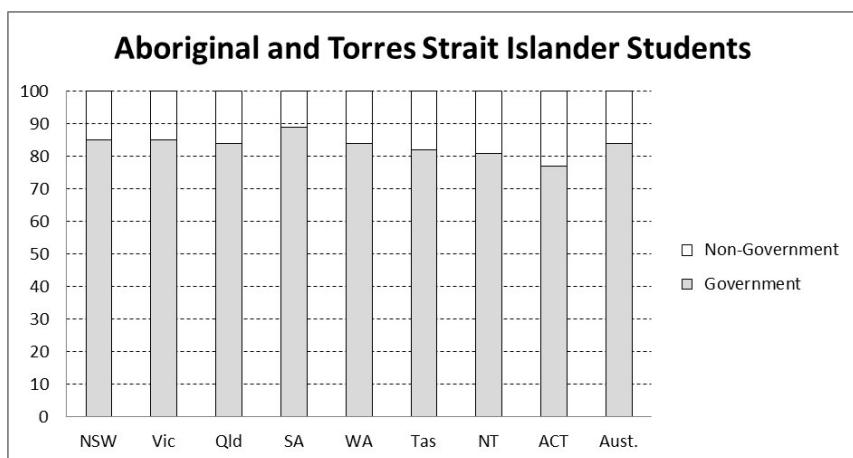
**Figure 1: Proportion of Population Identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander**

Data drawn from ABS [1]. Summary data are available in Appendix 1.



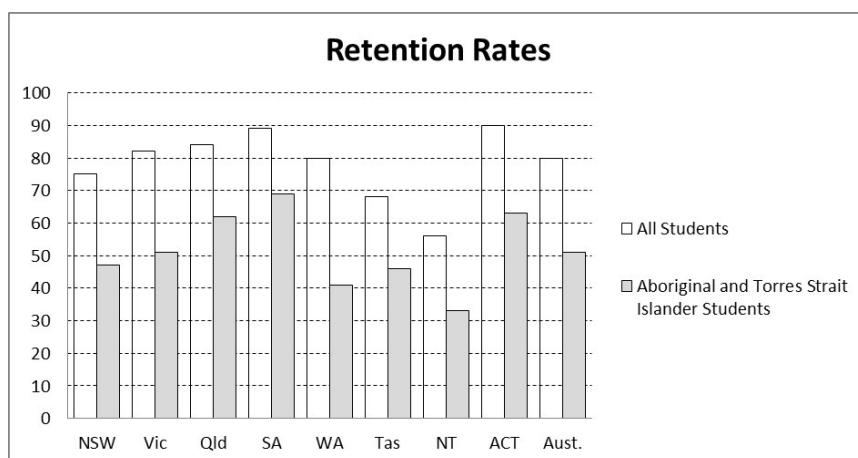
**Figure 2: Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People within Capital City/Rest of State Areas**

Data drawn from ABS [2]. Note that national data are not available.



**Figure 3: Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students Enrolled in Government and Non-Government Schools**

Data drawn from ABS [1]. Summary data are available in Appendix 1.



**Figure 3: Retention Rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students**

Data drawn from ABS [1]. Summary data are available in Appendix 1.

These statistics indicate that the perspectives offered by members of our union are likely to differ from that offered by professional associations operating in other states and territories.

Our union believes that respectful and constructive relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Australians from other cultural backgrounds require acknowledgement that many of the challenges faced by current generations have their genesis in unfair and unjust policies and practices of colonisation.

Reversing the psychological, social and economic impact of these policies and practices is a long-term undertaking and it is imperative that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are empowered by, rather than excluded from, decision-making processes.

The content of this submission was, therefore, developed by, and through direct consultation with, members who self-identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander persons.

Input was sought from individuals attending regular *Yarning Up* sessions held within the greater Brisbane region and through an e-mail invitation extended to all members who had, at the time of joining, self-identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander persons. As of September 2015, this constituted 1.21% of our total membership (219 individuals).

Responses were received from members working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a variety of settings; ranging from specialist/community schools in urban areas, through to smaller Catholic and Independent schools in rural and remote communities.

Two general points that were raised by our members were:

1. A need to recognise the different circumstances and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in urban, regional and remote communities and;
2. The importance of broader support services for families and communities.

To assist the Standing Committee, more specific commentary and responses have been collated under headings corresponding to the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry [4].

### **Access to, participation in and outcomes of pre-schooling**

***SYNOPSIS: Access to, participation in and outcomes of pre-schooling are improved when early childhood education is respectful of the language and culture of the child and takes place in settings that facilitate constructive, collaborative relationships between early childhood educators, family and community members and providers of other support services.***

The fundamental importance of early childhood education in shaping an individual's psychosocial orientation is widely recognised by international education experts and the economic and social benefits of a shift to broader, long-term goals is a growing feature of political dialogue in prosperous societies [5].

A recent report by the McKell Institute examines international trends in government support of early childhood education and it is clear that other developed nations have recognised the value of greater support in the early years [6].

Investing in the early years of a child's life delivers a wide range of benefits, ranging from greater tax revenues through to higher standards of health, reduced public expenditure on social welfare programmes and lower levels of crime [7, 8]. Research by the Nobel-Prize winning economist Professor James Heckman has, in fact, demonstrated that investment in the early years has a substantially higher rate of return than interventions designed to overturn the longer-term consequences of early disadvantage [9].

Feedback from our members is entirely consistent with this perspective.

A persistent theme in member feedback was the need for programs that recognise the geographic, linguistic and cultural diversity of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

ABS data indicates that 9% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals in Queensland speak a language other than English at home [10]. In The Northern Territory, this figure rises to 59% [11].

Both national and international studies indicate that awareness of, and sensitivity to, identity, language and culture of the child is crucial for establishment of productive relationships that lead to successful engagement with education [12-14].

This, along with a difficulty in attracting and retaining qualified and experienced early childhood educators in rural and remote communities, is a key justification for programs that focus on education and training that develops the capacity of local community members rather than relying on itinerant workers [15]. There are, however, some limitations to this approach.

ACECQA's most recent report on implementation of the National Quality Framework indicated that The Northern Territory has the lowest percentage of services meeting or exceeding the National Quality Standard [16], with 79% of services that have been rated designated as "Working Towards NQS" and only 20% meeting or exceeding the NQS. This compares to 72% of services meeting or exceeding the NQS in Queensland and 66% nationally. The report also indicates that services in remote and very remote areas are far less likely to be rated Meeting or Exceeding NQS than services in rural and metropolitan areas [16].

The link between a high proportion of services not meeting the NQS and a lack of qualified staff is reflected in statistics relating to waivers.

Under the current Education and Care Services National Law, an approved provider may apply for a temporary waiver from requirements of the NQS in relation to staffing and/or physical environment. The most recent quarterly report from ACECQA indicates that The Northern Territory has the second highest proportion of services operating with a waiver, and that the waiver is most likely to relate to staffing requirements. In Queensland, the percentage of services operating under waivers is much lower, and waivers are more likely to relate to the physical environment than to staffing [16].

Addressing the imbalance requires a long-term strategy to promote and enhance the professionalism of early childhood educators in remote communities.

While we recognise that there are a number of national and state/territory plans currently in place to do this, we would like to draw attention to international examples that generate higher levels of engagement, and better outcomes, for Indigenous students.

As part of a joint initiative between the New Zealand Education Institute Te Riu Roa and the Ministry of Education in New Zealand [12] for example, practitioners were asked to identify key principles of collaboration between community members and education and care workers. They found that enactment of reform requires all stakeholders to:

1. Have an agreed, clear purpose
2. Have shared values and ways of working
3. Be community driven, mindful of context and responsive to local educational priorities
4. Committed to shared responsibility for the success of all learners
5. Focussed on building knowledge and learning through disciplined inquiry and
6. Have relational trust.

Our purpose, in drawing attention to New Zealand initiative is to highlight the necessity for collaboration between government and practitioners.

Educational reform in Australia has, in recent years, taken an increasingly top-down approach. International and domestic studies clearly indicate that the failure to recognise and cultivate the professional status of teachers and educators limits, rather than encourages, the reflexive, locally responsive learning programs that are a hallmark of quality education.

This is particularly relevant in the context of early childhood education, where children's initial engagement with schooling depends on their ability to recognise its relevance and significance to them, as individuals.

Within this context, it is important to acknowledge that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students come to schooling with compound problems that extend beyond the challenges of linguistic diversity.

Statistics relating to levels of domestic violence, drug use and sexual assault are abundant in the media and grey literature, as are various plans and policies aimed at reducing their prevalence.

Rather than simply reiterate these troubling statistics, our union would prefer to draw attention to what can be achieved through a genuine, long-term commitment to positive and constructive action, as discussed above and below.

## **The provision of boarding school education and its outcomes**

***SYNOPSIS: Access to boarding schools does not negate, or compensate for, lack of access to quality education in a student's home community. Unethical practices by some regional and metropolitan boarding schools exacerbate disadvantage and disengagement in rural and remote communities.***

Consultation with members indicates that the role of boarding schools in education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is an area of significant concern. While we recognise the good intentions behind many schemes offering subsidised placements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students [17], such programs can have unintended negative consequences for students and their home communities.

While the intention may be to provide students with access to quality education and create a new generation of leaders working in a wide range of fields, the reality is that there are

many reasons why boarding schools prove unsuccessful for individual students; ranging from homesickness and dislike of the boarding environment to a lack of understanding of the boarding context and expectations.

Anecdotal evidence from members indicates that, in some communities, many students drop out of boarding school and return to their home communities after just one or two terms and many within a few weeks. The sense of failure that some students feel upon return can translate into arrogance or aggression toward their local community school and elders and lead to long-term disengagement with education.

A second concern raised by members was that boarding schools from urban centres often time recruitment visits to local communities just prior to school census periods. As the students are enrolled at boarding schools during the census period, when students then return from boarding school and resume their studies at local community schools, allocations of staff, funding and resources are often inadequate.

While a more ethical approach to recruitment of students and induction into the boarding school lifestyle may reduce the numbers of students who return from boarding school before completing their studies, the prevailing view of members with experience in remote communities was that a reliance on boarding schools cannot, and should not, replace investment in local schools and support services.

An additional point of note here is that IEUA-QNT often fields enquiries from members around rules and regulations governing boarding schools. Examples range from questions about professional development for boarding house staff to whether schools are required to provide on-site medical services for students.

Responding to such queries can be difficult because, at present, there is no federal legislation governing the operation of boarding schools and, while there is state legislation in New South Wales and Western Australia, boarding school operators in Queensland and The Northern Territory have effectively no legal obligations to boarders, staff or parents beyond those specified in site-specific contracts.

In the absence of any single piece of governing legislation, boarding schools have, instead, been covered by isolated clauses in various other pieces of legislation. In Queensland, this includes widely disparate Acts such as the Education (Accreditation of Non-State Schools) Act 2001 through to the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Act 2000 and Industrial Relations Act 1999.

The gap in legislation has been partially addressed through recent development of a new Draft Boarding Standard for Australian Schools and Hostels [18], which provide detailed recommendations regarding: Governance and management; safety, health and wellbeing of boarders; competence and professional development of staff; parent, family and community engagement; and facilities.

It is, however, important to note that the standards represent a guide to best practice within the sector rather than legal obligations.

**Access to, participation in, and benefits of different school models for indigenous students in different parts of Australia**

**Engagement and achievement of students in remote areas**

**Impact on, and support for, families and communities whose children experience different models of educational services**

**Best practice models, both domestically and internationally**

***SYNOPSIS: Best practice is a highly situated, locally responsive concept achieved through empowerment of community members and education professionals.***

***Building the relationships that improve outcomes for students takes time and persistence and is, therefore, dependent on secure, long-term access to funding and resources.***

The long-term success of any plan to maximise educational opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is critically dependent on recognition that the needs of each student population vary in relation to their geographic location and the level of support already in place.

There are however, a number of general principles that should underpin any plan for reform that can be drawn from the experiences of communities and schools that can, and do, achieve remarkable results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Rather than seeking to overhaul current policies and practices and replace them with a new suite of initiatives, we encourage the Standing Committee to recognise the common elements of successful localised programs and work constructively with practitioners to apply these more widely.

***Principle 1: Recognise the professionalism of teachers and other education workers***

Broader studies of education reform indicate that professional recognition of teachers and other education professionals is essential to generation of the strong, collegial environments that deliver best results for students [19].

Education reform too often commences with a rhetoric of teacher deficiency that gives rise to hierarchical imposition of administrative and record-keeping duties that diminish teachers' natural reserves of intrinsic motivation and drive them out of the profession.

While it can be difficult to obtain accurate figures because many teachers remain registered after leaving the profession, globally, it is estimated that between 17 and 50 percent of teachers resign within their first five years of teaching [20-25].

Attrition has wide-ranging effects. Not only does it waste time and money for schools and education systems and cause considerable personal distress for the individuals involved, it has a significant negative impact on student learning. A long-term study conducted in the United States has shown that when teachers leave, learning drops [26]. This effect is most pronounced in hard-to-staff schools and schools with high numbers of at-risk students [20, 26].

Our union wishes to emphasise the point that the needs of students cannot be separated from the needs of education workers.

An additional point of note here is that, while most states and territories offer incentives for beginning and experienced teachers to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in regional and remote areas, many of those who take up these options would benefit from greater interaction with the community prior to placement. Our union suggests that further work could be done in relation to providing opportunities for pre-service teachers, and more experienced teachers contemplating a move to regional or remote areas, to enhance their cultural awareness prior to relocation.

***Principle 2: Achieving lasting change requires long-term commitment***

Building the relationships that improve outcomes for students takes time and persistence, because empowering community members and education professionals to work together and develop the highly situated, locally responsive solutions required for success requires long-term, stable funding and resources.

Study of the process of reform in Australian schools indicates that the predominant focus on short-term change is incompatible with the reality of practice.

Optimal translation of reform into practice typically requires 5-10 years [27-29], but government plans rarely allow this much time. The Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs previous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan for example, covered the four year period from 2010-2014 [30].

Non-government, community-based schools provide compelling evidence of what can be achieved.

Brisbane's Aboriginal and Islander Community School (also known as The Murri School), for example, commenced as a primary-only school in 1986 and now has attendance rates as high as 90% for primary students and 81% for secondary [31]. In 2014, 70% of eligible students graduated with a Queensland Certificate of Education [31].

Their success can, and should, be celebrated as an illustration of the key principles that allow communities to provide a safe, supportive and stable educational environment for students. The dedicated staff and community members perform their work for the benefit of future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, rather than recognition from the wider community, but there is much in their approach that can be adapted for implementation in non-specialist schools.

***Principle 3: Comprehensive support services enable intergenerational change***

An emphasis on comprehensive support services means Murri School students have access to on-site auditory testing, paediatric assessments, regular health and dental checks and psychological support.

The school, and its staff, also invest in relationships with parents and other community members. Initiatives such as family camps in the school holidays, offering a Certificate III in Education Support for parents and community members, encouragement of parent volunteers and inviting community members into the school for weekly morning teas are important to establish trust with previous generations, whose own experience of the education system has, all too often, been less than positive.

Our union strongly supports this model of embedding quality schools and support services within communities, but we also recognise that not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reside in communities where establishing and maintaining a community school is a viable option.

In this context, we would like to make the broader point that providing teachers and educators with the time they need to develop and implement high-quality education

programs, within their normal hours of duty, should be a priority of any initiative designed to improve student outcomes, as should the engagement and retention of support staff. This is true for both government and non-government schools.

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

***SYNOPSIS: The requirements for provision of high-quality education and support services are universal and have been detailed in our response to other Terms of Reference, above. Were these more widely enacted, long-term outcomes for all students would improve.***

A child's experience of education has a significant impact on the trajectory of their life. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students struggle to engage with learning in the first instance because they face ongoing challenges that have their genesis in unfair and inequitable policies and practices of colonisation.

We have known for many years that changing perceptions and experiences of education for these students requires a long-term commitment, commencing with early childhood education programs that are respectful of the language and culture of the child and continuing through to constructive, collaborative relationships with family and community members and other support services.

As indicated in response to previous Terms of Reference, our union believes that a focus on provision of quality education in a general and wholistic sense would, quite naturally, lead to improved outcomes in further education and employment.

### **Concluding Statement**

IEUA-QNT thanks the Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs for the opportunity to provide feedback in relation to the Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students.

Reversing the psychological, social and economic impact of the unfair and inequitable policies and practices which have led to disengagement of an unacceptably high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students requires a long-term commitment to respectful and constructive relationships between individuals within local communities.

Our submission draws on input from teachers, support staff and ancillary staff in non-government education institutions in Queensland and The Northern Territory who work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a variety of settings; ranging from specialist/community schools in urban areas, through to smaller Catholic and Independent schools in rural and remote communities and highlights the following points:

1. The needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students vary depending on whether they reside in urban, regional or remote communities.
2. The provision of broader support services for families and communities enhances the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to engage with education.

3. Access to, participation in and outcomes at the pre-schooling level and beyond are improved when early childhood education is respectful of the language and culture of the child and takes place in settings that facilitate constructive, collaborative relationships between early childhood educators, family and community members and providers of other support services.
4. Access to boarding schools does not negate, or compensate for, lack of access to quality education in a student's home community. Unethical practices by some regional and metropolitan boarding schools exacerbate disadvantage and disengagement in rural and remote communities.
5. Best practice is a highly situated, locally responsive concept achieved through empowerment of community members and education professionals and the provision of adequate, long-term funding and resources for both schools and other support services.
6. Building the relationships that improve outcomes for students takes time and persistence and is, therefore, dependent on long-term, stable funding and resources.
7. The requirements for provision of high-quality education and support services (summarised in points 1-6 above) are universal. Were these more widely enacted, outcomes for all students would improve.

We would welcome the opportunity to engage in further discussion and consultation.

Terry Burke  
**Secretary**  
**Independent Education Union of Australia**  
**Queensland and Northern Territory Branch**

29<sup>th</sup> October 2015

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## Appendix 1: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011 Census Data[1] Overview

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Aust.
<b>% of Population</b>									
Non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	97.1	99.1	95.8	97.7	96.2	95.3	70.2	98.3	97
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	2.9	0.9	4.2	2.3	3.8	4.7	29.8	1.7	3
<b>% of Schools</b>									
Government	70	69	72	73	72	75	80	66	71
Non-government	30	31	28	27	28	25	20	34	29
<b>All Students</b>									
Government	65	63	67	64	66	70	72	58	65
Non-Government	35	37	33	36	34	30	28	42	35
<b>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students</b>									
Government	85	85	84	89	84	82	81	77	84
Non-Government	15	15	16	11	16	18	19	23	16
<b>Retention Rates</b>									
All Students	75	82	84	89	80	68	56	90	80
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students	47	51	62	69	41	46	33	63	51
<b>In-School Staff</b>									
Government	63	60	65	63	64	68	70	60	63
Non-Government	37	40	35	37	36	32	30	40	37