



## Educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

30 October 2015

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### **About the National Catholic Education Commission**

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) is established by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference through the Bishops Commission for Catholic Education to maintain effective liaison with the Commonwealth Government and other key national education bodies. The NCEC complements and supports at the national level the work of the State and Territory Catholic Education Commissions.

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## Introduction

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission as part of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs' inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

Catholic schools educate more than 750,000 students in more than 1,700 schools across Australia. Catholic school communities are geographically, economically and socially diverse: they are located in all states and territories, in metropolitan through to very remote communities, and they educate students from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Catholic schools also include a diverse range of school types, including special schools, majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools and sole-provider schools. They have increasing numbers of Indigenous students and students with disability.

Catholic schools strive to ensure students are not prevented from achieving their potential because of background or family circumstances, or because of the location of their schools. Catholic education supports the principles for the education of Indigenous children and young people enshrined in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy:

- Achieve potential: High expectations are held for, and by, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people
- Equity: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are able to access the same educational opportunities and achieve the same education outcomes as other Australians
- Accountability: Education systems and educators are accountable, transparent and responsive
- Cultural recognition: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's histories, values, languages and cultures are acknowledged and respected
- Relationships: Meaningful relationships value community cultural knowledge, wisdom and expertise, and demonstrate trust and respect
- Partnerships: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are engaged in decision making, planning, delivery and evaluation of early childhood, schooling and higher education services at local, sector and national levels
- Local approaches: Educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are accelerated through local approaches for unique and diverse communities
- Quality: Policies, practices, programmes and partnerships are inclusive of the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and their families, and are informed by knowledge, evidence and research.<sup>1</sup>

The NCEC submission will show that Catholic schools are welcoming an increasing number and proportion of Indigenous students. It will address key aspects of educational opportunities and outcomes for Indigenous students, including:

- access to and participation in these opportunities
- the provision of boarding school education

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<sup>1</sup> COAG Education Council, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy* (2015), 3.

- different school models of educational provision for Indigenous students
- Indigenous student engagement and achievement in regional and remote areas.

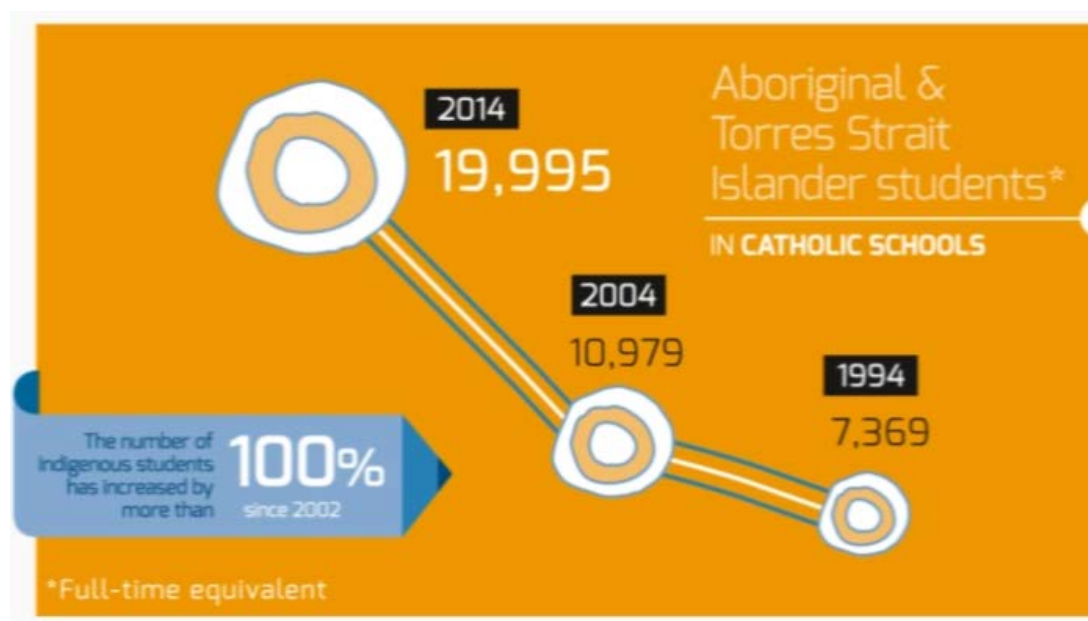
In this submission, the terms 'Indigenous' and 'Indigenous students' are used in a culturally inclusive way to refer to people who have identified or been identified as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent.

Although the submission will draw on various examples from Catholic education across Australian states and territories, on many occasions the specific examples given will be relevant to other states. Finally, the submission makes a number of recommendations for the Committee's consideration.

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Catholic schools**

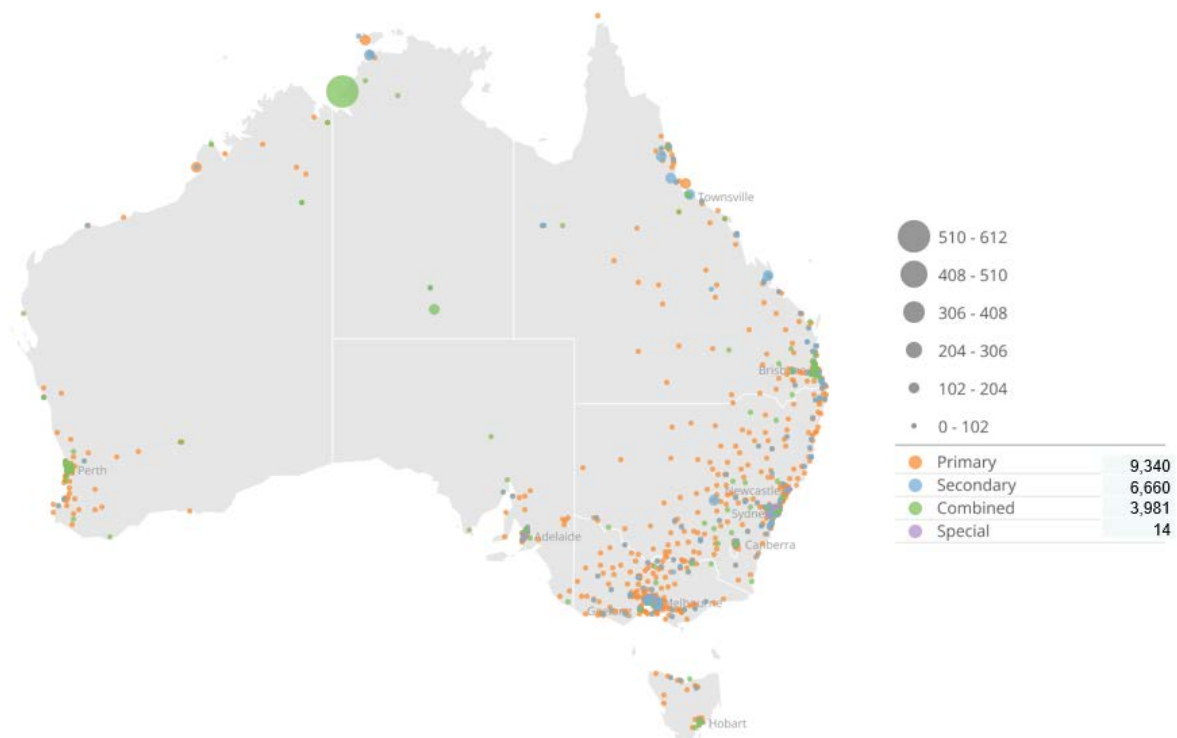
In 2014, Catholic schools were educating 19,995 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across Australia. This reflects the continuing increase in the number and proportion of Indigenous students in Catholic schools in recent decades. Since 2002, the number of Indigenous students in Catholic schools has more than doubled. Figure 1 shows the increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and Figure 2 charts the location of these students in Catholic schools across Australia.

Figure 1: Indigenous students in Catholic schools



**Figure 2: Indigenous students in Catholic schools by location, 2014**

Total Indigenous Students- 19,995



Source: Australian Government Department of Education School Census Data and geo-location data retrieved from the Australian Catholic Education Statistics Database.

### **Access to, participation in and outcomes of preschool**

Schooling is one of the building blocks in the ‘Closing the Gap’ strategy agreed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG).<sup>2</sup> It recognises that a good education is the way to community participation, employment and opportunities in later life. Quality early childhood education is an essential part of this strategy. Early childhood education opens pathways for Indigenous children to make good transitions to school and later on to employment. Therefore, Catholic education strongly supports Aboriginal children’s access to pre-school services.

Catholic schools endeavour to help Indigenous students, parents and families with the transition to formal schooling. Schools, families and students all benefit from better transition pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. For example, in Queensland, a Catholic school pre-prep programme has been developed to cater for the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children, so that children successfully transition into the school environment. In the programme, Indigenous children starting preparatory school the following year received resources to assist in the development of early literacy and numeracy skills.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Government, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister’s Report* (2015), 10.

In Western Australia, all primary and composite Catholic schools administer four-year-old kindergarten programmes for a minimum of 15 hours per week, which are open to all students. Catholic Education Western Australia advises that the 'Performance Indicators in Primary Schools' programme demonstrates that Indigenous students who enter school ready—in terms of literacy and numeracy skills—make the same progress as non-Aboriginal students entering at the same level.

The importance of early childhood in shaping educational outcomes has spurred Catholic Education Western Australia to explore programmes such as community-based playgroups for Indigenous children and the 'Families as First Educators' initiative for regional and remote communities, using the Abecedarian approach.<sup>3</sup> It is envisaged that these early years playgroup programmes will employ and train Aboriginal staff to work alongside families demonstrating communication, pre-reading and play strategies that develop social, emotional and cognitive skills.

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

NCEC has welcomed the Commonwealth Government's investment of an additional \$6.8 million and, more recently, \$5.4 million to support the education of Indigenous students attending boarding schools. This will benefit nine Catholic schools in 2015 and the hundreds of students with particular needs that attend those schools. Although this support is valued, this funding is finite and consideration will need to be given to ensure both the sustainability of Indigenous boarding schools and support for these particular students when the funding ceases.

In Queensland, the growth of boarding school education is a pathway for Indigenous students in rural and remote areas to participate in high quality education. Through the boarding programme there have been increased enrolments and retention of students at schools. The success of the programme has recognised the importance of employing Indigenous workers, which helps to strengthen the bond between the school and the families of Indigenous boarders.

In NSW there are currently 15 Catholic boarding schools, which enrol 244 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Catholic Education Commission NSW supports the provision of a boarding school option for Indigenous families but is mindful of the need to:

- implement complementary strategies that continue to link students to their families and communities
- promote flexible boarding school participation patterns that allow for shared programmes of attendance across both local community schools and boarding schools
- promote choice of boarding school enrolment for parents that the current foundation scholarship provision limits
- implement support strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolling in major city systemic Catholic schools from rural and remote area Catholic and government schools.

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<sup>3</sup> On the Abecedarian approach see Craig Ramey, Sharon Ramey, Joseph Sparling (2012) *Abecedarian: The Ideas, the Approach, and the Findings*.

In South Australia, Catholic education programmes seek to reimagine the structures of boarding schools in an effort to increase enrolments, improve educational success, post-school transitions and the life chances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote areas.

In Western Australia, the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students come from remote and isolated parts of the state. With limited secondary education available in remote schools, increasing numbers of families are sending their children to main town or major city boarding schools and schools that have links with private hostels. Catholic Education Western Australia has eight sole-provider schools in the Kimberley. However, Catholic Education Western Australia advises that the enrolment of Indigenous students from remote areas brings with it a number of challenges, including:

- Homesickness: Indigenous students from remote communities often experience nostalgia. The boarding schools use a variety of strategies to overcome this and help the students maintain regular contact with their families and communities.
- Funding: Confusion over ABSTUDY, including application and approval processes, engenders uncertainty over eligibility, which can affect whether a student is accepted by a school.
- Boarding school facilities and enrolments: Enrolment demand and the desire to improve the quality of boarding school facilities are a challenge.

Despite these challenges, Catholic boarding schools continue to strive for excellent educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The provision of this form of schooling as an option for Indigenous families who choose it should be complemented by strategies that continue to link students to their families and communities.

### **Access to, participation in, and benefits of different school models for Indigenous students**

Catholic Education Northern Territory is an education provider for diverse schools. It has five Indigenous Catholic Community Schools. The diversity in provision is illustrated by the following examples. St John's College Darwin caters for remote Indigenous boarders as well as day students and St Joseph's Flexible Learning Centre in Alice Springs has an enrolment of primarily Indigenous students who would otherwise not be engaged in schooling.

The Indigenous Catholic Community Schools in the Northern Territory, which are based on the model of bi-cultural education (two-way teaching and learning), provide an educational programme that:

- acknowledges the culture of both the home and the school
- reinforces the teaching and learning relationship between the elders and the younger members of the community
- promotes engagement with the local community
- recognises the importance of Indigenous languages and knowledge in the curriculum.

The NSW Government Connected Communities model of schooling is a beneficial model for remote and very remote Indigenous communities. These Connected Communities schools serve Indigenous families. One NSW remote Catholic school is participating in the Connected Communities programme—St Joseph's School Walgett. Catholic Education

Commission NSW supports the NSW Connected Communities model of schooling as an initiative suited to the requirements of rural and remote Indigenous communities.

Historically NSW Catholic schools have been involved in a range of approaches to implementing 'Full Service Schooling' models of school delivery. During the Howard Government a number of pilots of 'Full Service Schools' delivery options were trialled as part of the funded 'Students at Risk' programme. It is recommended that the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs consider the outcomes of the Howard Government 'Students at Risk' programme. This programme funded a number of support strategies for Indigenous families and their school age children, which were at the time considered to be successful.

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

School attendance is one of the greatest challenges Catholic schools face in remote areas. Given there is a strong link between school attendance and student performance, COAG's objective is to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance within five years (by 2018).<sup>4</sup> In 2015, the Prime Minister's *Closing the Gap* report showed that "the gap in school attendance rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students widens as children age and tends to be significantly greater in remote and very remote areas."<sup>5</sup> According to the COAG Reform Council, there has been no overall improvement in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school attendance rates.<sup>6</sup> In 2013, 85 per cent of Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities were enrolled in schools compared to the target of 95 per cent.<sup>7</sup>

High-quality principals and teaching staff are essential for the delivery of education in remote areas. Attracting and retaining teaching staff is made more difficult when suitable housing is not available or when existing housing is unsuitable and is prohibitively expensive to repair. In particular, this makes recruiting principals and teachers with families to remote areas extremely difficult. Capital funding for staff housing in remote areas would greatly assist in addressing the level of educational disadvantage that exists in rural and remote Australia.

In the Northern Territory, Catholic education acknowledges the importance of Indigenous communities embracing the value and significance of education. Parental engagement in the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is nurtured through a number of strategies, including:

- Indigenous community liaison officers
- assistance with transportation, meals and other amenities
- interaction with other services such as health and housing.

Education cannot be seen in isolation in remote communities. Consideration must be given as to how and why a school is valued by the students and wider community. Employment pathways and social infrastructure are also important considerations.

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<sup>4</sup> *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report* (2015), 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> COAG Reform Council, *Education in Australia 2012: Five years of performance* (2013), 55.

<sup>7</sup> *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report* (2015), 5.

An example of an employment pathway initiated by Catholic Education in the Northern Territory is the 'Growing Our Own' programme. In partnership with Charles Darwin University, 'Growing Our Own' aims to develop a quality, local Indigenous teacher workforce, supporting Indigenous assistant teachers to become teachers. Eleven students have graduated and four of these are teaching full time in Catholic education.

In Queensland, the inclusion of subjects that are linked appropriately to occupations present in the remote communities create vocational pathways for Indigenous students. Students currently train in educational support certificate and allied health certificate with the purpose of returning to their communities to use the certificates in future employment.

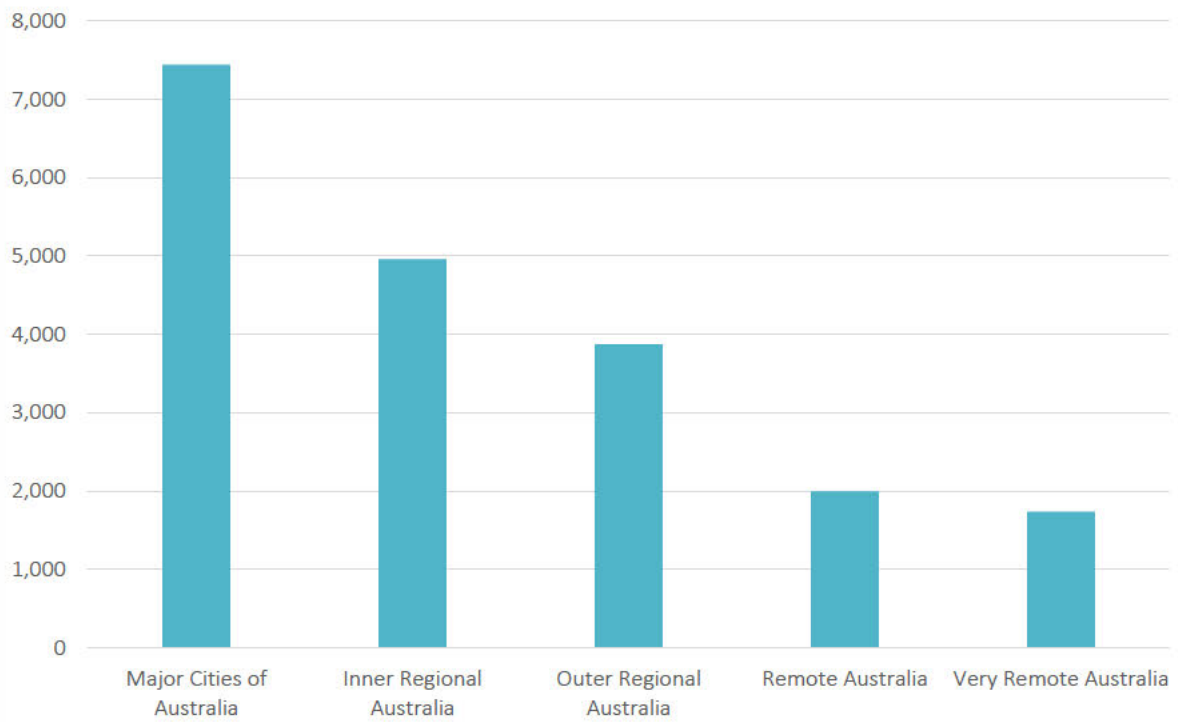
In Western Australia, remote Catholic schools are supported to adopt innovative learning programmes to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students according to their local context. Examples include 'Reading Recovery'—a second wave literacy programme, participation in the 'Focus Schools Project' and recently implemented 'Flexible Literacy Project' supported by the 'Good to Great Schools' programme.

Moreover, the employment of Aboriginal teaching assistants (ATAs) in every remote school classroom is a significant strategy employed by Catholic Education Western Australia. An ATA serves as an education assistant, a cultural advisor and interpreter to the teacher, and a liaison between the classroom, families and community. The provision of ATAs is targeted at reducing teacher-student ratios for more intensive teaching. It is also aimed at improving school attendance by fostering a sense of connection to community.

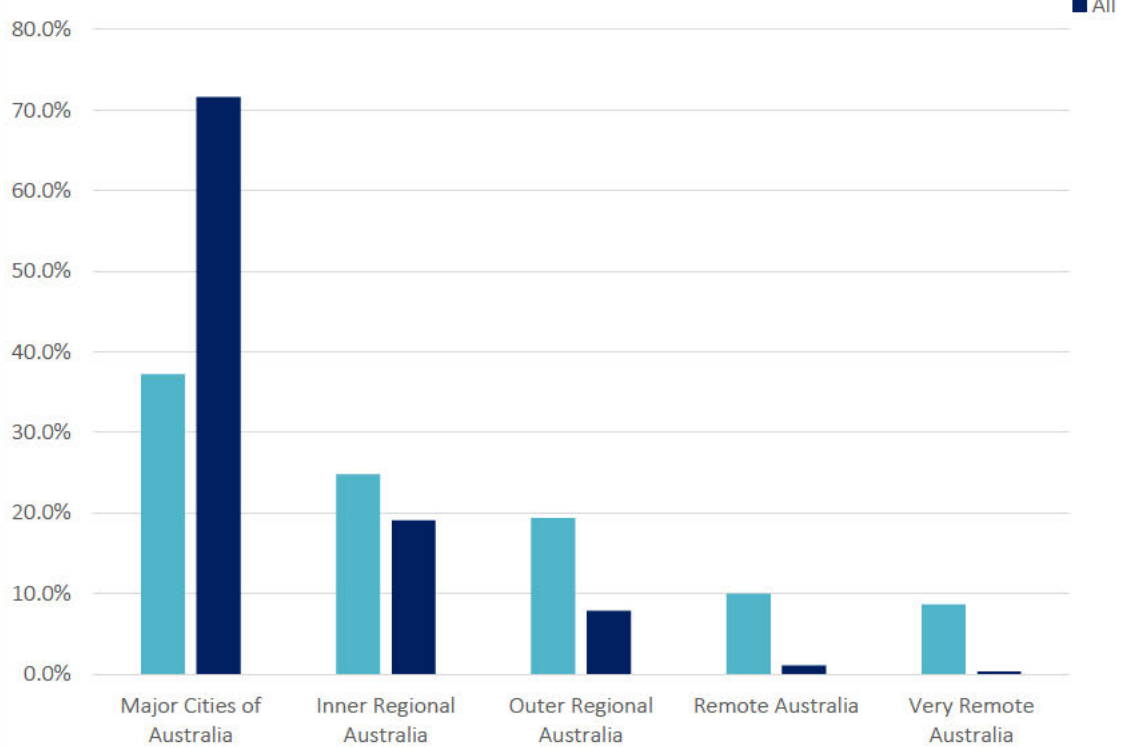
In the figures below, Figure 3 shows the numbers of Indigenous students in Catholic schools by remoteness location and Figure 4 shows the enrolment shares in Catholic schools by remoteness location. The light blue bar shows the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Catholic schools by remoteness and the dark blue bar shows the proportion of students in Catholic schools by remoteness.



**Figure 3: Number of Indigenous Students by Remoteness Category in Catholic schools, 2014**



**Figure 4: Proportion of students in Catholic schools by Remoteness Category (ATSI and all), 2014**



Source (Figure 3 and Figure 4): Australian Government Department of Education School Census Data and ABS remoteness classification.

### **Best practice models, domestic and international**

The best practice models embraced by Catholic education include the following:

- Catholic schools with significant enrolments of Indigenous students have personalised learning plans
- best practice models used in Kimberley schools have resulted in the development of the 'Focus Schools Project' where all schools in the Kimberley region have non-negotiable elements in their teaching and learning
- the use of trained Aboriginal teaching assistants in Western Australia, which is integral to the success of parental and community involvement, and the development of appropriate teaching strategies for Indigenous students (this is also the case in other jurisdictions)
- the Connected Communities model of schooling is regarded as a best practice initiative for remote and very remote communities in NSW
- 'Growing Our Own' is a cost-effective teacher training programme in the Northern Territory that creates employment pathways and produces genuine role models for the Indigenous community. It is a joint venture with Charles Darwin University.

### **Study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and cultures**

To support our Indigenous students in strengthening their unique identity as Indigenous Australians and to assist them in gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation of their histories and cultures, Catholic education supports the inclusion of:

- Australian curriculum Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures content and perspectives in appropriate learning areas
- Indigenous language and culture programmes where requested by a school community.

### **Conclusions**

Catholic education is committed to improving outcomes for Indigenous students in Catholic schools. Despite the complexities and challenges of creating educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, there has been much progress across Catholic education in Australia. Endeavours to innovate with strategies and programmes that deliver quality education and seek to close the gap between Indigenous students and other Australian students have been fruitful. Catholic schools will continue their longstanding commitment to engaging Indigenous students by providing quality educational opportunities and pastoral care.

It should be noted that the Committee's inquiry and its terms of reference address complex, long-term issues that require considered solutions. There are schools in remote and very remote areas that operate under difficult circumstances and face challenges to attract quality staff. If these and other challenges facing Indigenous education are to be met, there needs to be a consistent approach to government policy that builds on previous successes, recognises that no single approach can solve all problems, and overcomes a tendency to a silo approach within government departments.

Policies need to be underpinned by genuine and meaningful local consultation within communities and an understanding of the reality and the context in which schools operate. Employment pathways and social infrastructure are considerations in the discussion of Indigenous education, particularly outside metropolitan areas.

## **Recommendations**

The Committee is encouraged to consider:

- supporting early intervention strategies which provide access to early childhood services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- recognising and supporting the full range of critical school transition points that build to meaningful post-school options and pathways
- supporting Indigenous students in boarding schools with a sustainable ongoing funding model
- supporting strategies to enhance parent, carer and family engagement in student learning and wellbeing.

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee's inquiry and can be contacted on (02) 8229 0800 or [ncec@ncec.catholic.edu.au](mailto:ncec@ncec.catholic.edu.au) for further information on any aspect of this submission.