



Independent Schools  
Council of Australia

## **Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities**

**Submission by  
The Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA)**

### **About ISCA**

The Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) is the peak national body covering the independent schools sector. It comprises the eight State and Territory Associations of Independent Schools. Through these Associations, ISCA represents a sector with 1,100 schools and around 530,000 students, accounting for 15 per cent of Australian school enrolments.

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. Independent schools include:

- Schools affiliated with larger and smaller Christian denominations for example, Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Uniting Church, Seventh Day Adventist and Presbyterian schools
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Rudolf Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as grammar schools in some states
- Community schools
- Indigenous community schools
- Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities
- Schools that cater for students at severe educational risk due to a range of social/emotional/behavioural and other risk factors.



Independent schools are not-for-profit institutions founded by religious or other groups in the community and are registered with the relevant state or territory education authority. Most independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example the Lutheran system. Systemic schools account for 16 per cent of schools in the independent sector.

Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for 10 per cent of the independent sector's enrolments. These schools have been included in the figures above.

## **Introduction**

The Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) is pleased to have this opportunity to address the access of rural and regional students, families and communities to secondary educational opportunities in the independent sector.

ISCA supports the work of Rural Education Forum Australia (REFA), a group of national organisations with an interest in education in rural and remote Australia. REFA's work is directed towards ensuring that quality education and training outcomes are achieved in rural and remote areas, so that those living in these communities can develop their full potential and participate in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the nation.

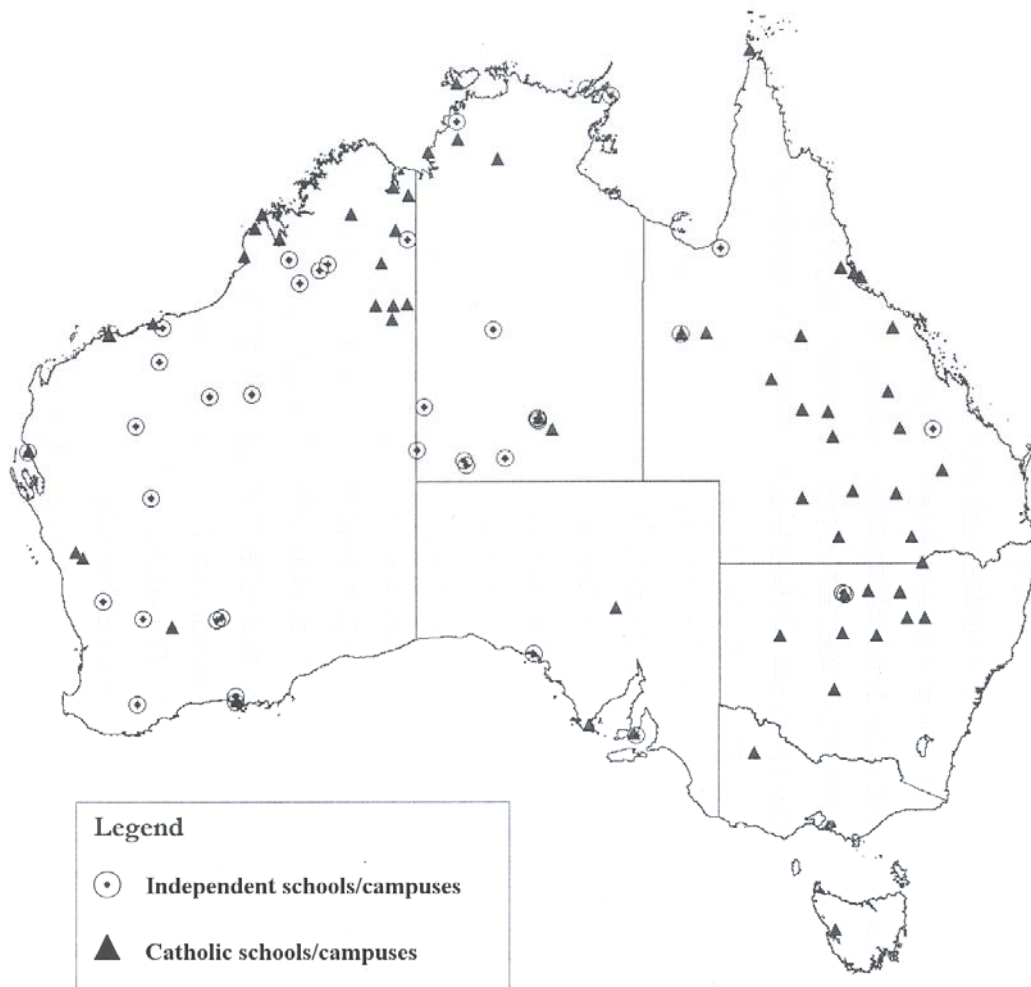
ISCA also liaises with relevant parent bodies such as the Isolated Children's Parents' Association (ICPA) and the Australian Parents Council (APC) that are active in promoting quality education for all students and between them seek to represent many parent groups of remote, rural, and metropolitan students.

There are a significant number of independent schools outside of the cities and larger regional centres. While 69 per cent of independent schools in Australia are located in metropolitan areas, 28 per cent are in provincial areas and 3 per cent are in remote areas. There are 37 independent schools with Indigenous enrolments of more than 50 per cent.

The independent schools sector provides a significant contribution to educating students from Australia's rural and remote areas, where the high costs of schooling provision poses a major challenge for governments and parents. The sector does this in a number of ways. Many of the students from these areas attend boarding schools in the state and territory capital cities or larger regional centres. Alternatively, they may board elsewhere, but attend school day students. Others attend independent schools in their local areas, such as Indigenous community schools, and some take up the option of distance education.

Independent schools in provincial and remote locations assist in creating real schooling choice for families in these areas. They include for example Anglican, Lutheran, Christian, Montessori and Steiner schools. In some extremely remote areas, independent schools are the only available schooling for local Indigenous children (see Map 1 below).

## Map 1: Independent and Catholic Schools and Campuses in Remote and Very Remote Australia 2006



Source: *The Sectoral Trends of Australian Schooling Volume 1*, NCEC Australian Catholic Statistics Working Group, 2008

### The funding of independent schools

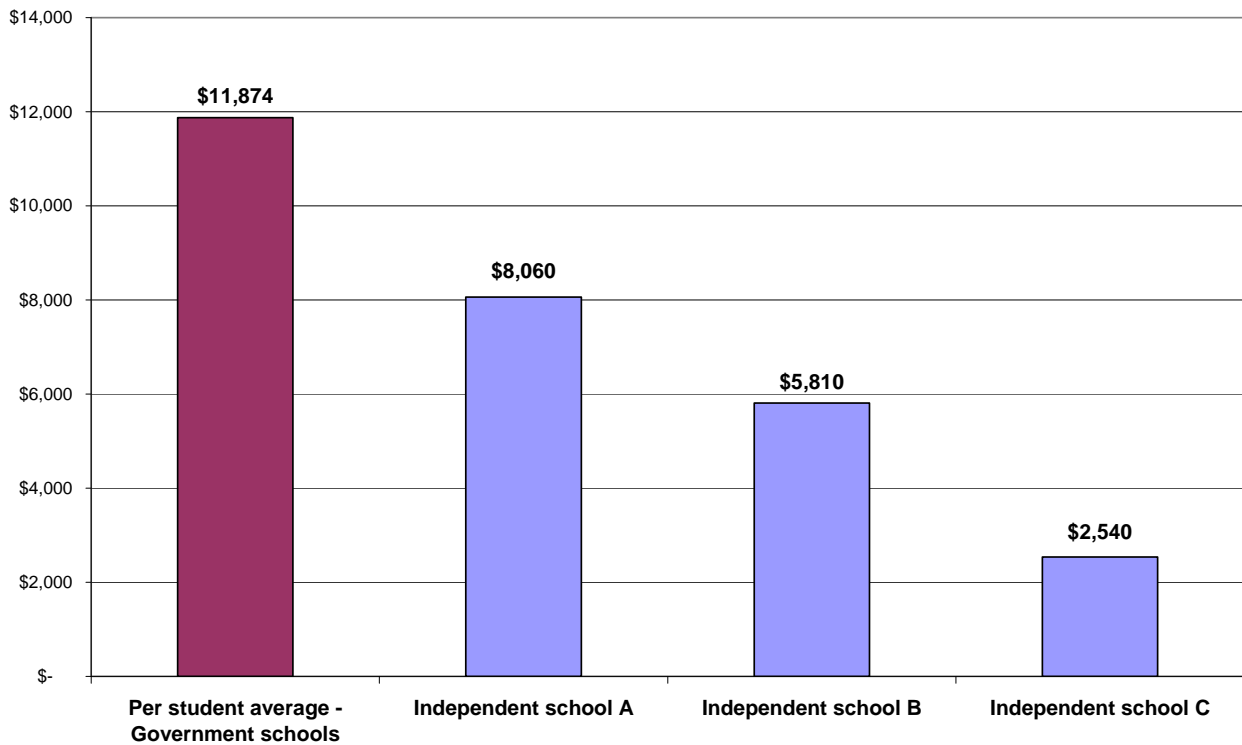
Independent schools are reliant for their operation on stable and predictable funding from three sources:

- Parents
- The Australian Government
- State and territory governments.

The private contribution made by parents and the school community represents the most significant source of funding for the independent school sector. On average, independent schools receive 60 per cent of income from private sources (mainly parents) and 40 per cent of income from governments.

Taking into account state and territory government and Australian Government contributions to Australian school education, students in independent schools on average receive less than half the public support of students in government schools and many students get far less (see Table 2 below).

**Table 2: Total Government Recurrent Funding Per Student – Government and Independent Schools 2006-07**



## Recurrent Grants Program

### *General Recurrent Grants*

Most Australian Government funding for independent schools is in the form of General Recurrent Grants (GRG). This funding is allocated to schools based on the SES funding model.

The SES funding model assesses the relative need of individual independent schools by reference to the Socio Economic Status (SES) of the communities from which the school draws its students. The SES index takes into account income levels, occupations and educational attainment within these communities. It provides a proxy measure of the circumstances of the families of students attending the school and therefore of the relative capacity of a given school community to support its schools as well as the relative barriers to education faced by students.

Funding is allocated on a per student basis with primary and secondary students receiving an amount based on the SES of the school as a proportion of the Average Government School Recurrent Cost (AGSRC). The proportion of AGSRC received by the school for the student ranges from 13.7 per cent for the highest SES and 70 per cent of AGSRC for the lowest SES schools. Low SES schools include special schools and Majority Indigenous Student Schools (see page 5).

### *Rural and Remote Loading*

Non-government schools which have one or more school campuses that are defined as a ‘moderately accessible school campus’, ‘remote school campus’ or ‘very remote school campus’ receive a remoteness loading for each student receiving primary or secondary education at the relevant campus.

The loading is 5 per cent, 10 per cent or 20 per cent respectively of a school's current SES funding level (regardless of whether a school has a maintained funding level or a guaranteed funding level). In a year when a school is a maximum SES funded school, its current SES funding level is 70 per cent of Average Government School Recurrent Cost (AGSRC) and the remoteness loading will be based on this funding level. The loading is not provided for distance education students.

School campuses are classified using the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Remoteness Structure under the Australian Standard Geographical Classification. The remoteness areas are defined using the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+) which measures remoteness in terms of the physical road distance to different sizes of service centre based on population.

#### *Distance Education*

Distance education funding is payable in respect of primary or secondary distance education students in non-government schools as long as the distance education students reside in the state in which their school is located, they are not home education students, they are enrolled at an approved school and they are funded or recognized by the State.

Eligible schools or systems receive distance education funding for their eligible distance education students at the base rate of 13.7 per cent of the primary or secondary AGSRC amounts on an FTE basis. That is, the school authority will receive funding having regard to the nature of the course load those students are undertaking and the time they are actually receiving distance education from the school.

#### *Majority Indigenous Student School Payments*

Non-government Majority Indigenous Student Schools have an SES funding level of 70 per cent of the relevant AGSRC amounts which is the highest funding level.

To be considered a Majority Indigenous Student School in any program year, a non-government school must have 80 per cent or more Indigenous enrolments, or be a very remote school with 50 per cent or more Indigenous enrolments.

### **Other recurrent funding for Indigenous students**

#### *Indigenous Supplementary Assistance*

From 1 January 2009, Indigenous Supplementary Assistance (ISA) replaced payments previously made to non-government schools through Indigenous Education Agreements under the provisions of the *Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000* for:

- Supplementary Recurrent Assistance (SRA)
- English as a Second Language – Indigenous Language Speaking Students (ESL-ILSS)
- Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS)
- Homework Centres
- Building an Indigenous Workforce in Government Service Delivery
- Transitional Project Assistance under the former National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (TPA-NIELNS).

ISA is paid to all non-government schools through their funding agreements with the Commonwealth made under the *Schools Assistance Act 2008* along with payments for other schools programs. ISA is allocated on a per Indigenous student enrolment basis (demand driven), with a higher per capita rate for secondary students and schools in remote/very remote areas. ISA indexation and remoteness classifications are aligned with those that apply to recurrent grants.

### *Indigenous Funding Guarantee*

The Indigenous Funding Guarantee (IFG) is a transitional funding measure introduced under the *Schools Assistance Act 2008*.

The IFG will ensure that non-government school systems and independent schools which might otherwise lose funding under the new arrangements are guaranteed to receive funding comparable to their entitlements in 2008. However, this Guarantee is not intended to insulate schools from any fall in enrolments which is a normal business consideration for schools.

### **Other Australian Government funding for rural and regional students**

#### *Targeted Programs - Country Areas Program*

The Country Areas Program (CAP) funds help schools and school communities improve the educational outcomes and opportunities of students who are educationally disadvantaged because of their geographic isolation. CAP helps isolated students to obtain similar learning outcomes as students in less isolated areas.

In 2009, \$5,246,000 in CAP funding will be provided to non-government education authorities in the states and Northern Territory for distribution to eligible schools.

#### *Assistance for Isolated Children*

Support for rural and remote families to access education is also available through the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme. The AIC Scheme assists mainly geographically isolated families with the additional costs incurred in educating their school aged children. Payments are made for primary and secondary students as well as tertiary students (who are either under the minimum age that their state or territory requires them to participate in education or under 16 years of age, whichever is the greater) who are geographically isolated and do not have reasonable daily access to an appropriate state school.

The Scheme can provide the Basic Boarding, Distance Education or Second Home allowances, or a Pensioner Education Supplement. These payments are free of income and assets tests. An Additional Boarding Allowance which is income tested is also available.

### **State and Territory Government funding**

State and territory governments provide approximately 11 per cent of the independent sector's total recurrent funding. However, the contribution by each state and territory government varies considerably. State and territory governments utilise a variety of funding methodologies which result in significant differences across jurisdictions.

Some state and territory governments do provide additional support for rural and remote schools and specific assistance for schools which service Indigenous communities.

### **Indigenous students**

There are more than 8,100 Indigenous students in the independent schools sector. Many of these students are in rural or remote areas. This represents 5.4 per cent of the Indigenous student population.

There is substantial commitment and innovation towards meeting the specific educational needs of Indigenous students across a range of settings and types of independent schools. Some students are within local independent schools, others attend schools that provide special programs for Indigenous students, some students attend boarding schools, while others attend Indigenous schools or Indigenous community schools that cater exclusively for Indigenous students. Some schools provide boarding scholarships.

The majority of Indigenous students in the sector are located in Queensland (33 per cent), New South Wales (21 per cent), Western Australia (18 per cent), and the Northern Territory (16 per cent).

Schools and the state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs) work together to provide a range of programs for Indigenous students. These include Australian Government and state/territory government funded programs which provide assistance to Indigenous students when starting school, and through additional classroom support, tutor assistance, homework centres, teacher and principal networks and other initiatives.

In Western Australia, Indigenous liaison officers have been employed to provide direct support to Indigenous students from rural and remote regions of Western Australia who are boarding at independent schools in Perth. The *Future Footprints* project aims to facilitate the transition to school for these students and to adjust to life away from home. The overarching goal is to improve the educational outcomes for Indigenous students and as a result, enhance their opportunities after school.

### **Students in boarding schools**

The independent schools sector is the major provider of boarding school facilities for Australian families, with some 147 boarding schools and about 17,200 students (see *Remote and regional students and independent boarding schools* below). These schools provide access to educational opportunities to many regional and remote families and a significant social service commitment to numerous communities.

The current social profile of boarding school students is significantly different to that of previous years. Boarders in independent schools now represent a diverse group of students from a range of backgrounds, and often from a number of countries. There are students from the cities, from regional and remote areas, overseas students and those whose parents are living and working overseas. Students board full-time, on a daily or weekly basis, or on an 'as required' basis, depending on their individual circumstances. This wide range brings diversity of experience and culture into school communities as a whole.

### **Remote and regional students and independent boarding schools<sup>1</sup>**

In 2006, Prospect Research and Marketing conducted a survey of boarding schools and the families of boarding students. Some 68 boarding schools across every state and territory in Australia participated in the study as well as more than 3,100 families.

#### *Parent responses*

The response to the survey reflected the importance of boarding services for these parents. For many, there is little choice but to board their children. 55 per cent of those surveyed run a farm or property. They are acutely aware that a quality secondary education underpins their children's future success, and that boarding helps alleviate the hardships of isolation in Australia's rural and remote areas.

Consequently, whilst parents of boarding students are often reluctant to send their children away to school, 92 per cent of them would still choose boarding if making the decision again.

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence, R. (2006), *Research into the sustainability of boarding schools*, Prospect Research and Marketing, Melbourne

Most parents surveyed also identified the benefits of boarding school. The vast majority believe boarding leads to a well-rounded, balanced person. They believe this is due to living in a more structured and disciplined environment, and from having a sense of belonging within a community. Most parents also believe that boarding helps teach children to be independent, self-reliant, tolerant and compassionate.

Where parents have a choice of school, the school's values play a significant role in their decision. A school's academic credentials may figure prominently, however parents attach equal importance to both the management and leadership of the boarding house, and the relative importance of both boarders and the boarding house within the wider school community.

They also look for tangible measures of a school's commitment, including academic support provided to boarders during study time, full-time boarding house staff, access to facilities, and after hours activities and events.

Parents expect schools to understand the needs of young people. This includes respecting their need for privacy, access to technology, and ensuring that the boarding house has properly trained staff. Nothing frustrates students and parents more than closed facilities, temporary or co-opted staff, weekend boredom, inadequate access to telephone and e-mail facilities, and, the most frequently mentioned point of all – poor food choice and dietary balance.

#### *Boarding school affordability*

47 per cent of the parents surveyed receive some form of support to pay school fees. Without this support, both parents and the boarding schools would be significantly financially affected. Given the high number of farming families that use boarding schools, ill-fortune such as drought and disease leave these parents and their children's schools vulnerable. More than one-third of boarding families stated that school fees are a critical factor in their selection of school, and they needed to know all the associated costs of schooling, not just the tuition and boarding fees.

A relatively small number of those surveyed had a family history of boarding. About 20 per cent had at least one parent attend the same school as their children, and 59 per cent of parents boarded during their senior school years.

There was strong evidence to suggest that boarding schools may grow in appeal. Many parents expressed a positive opinion of the structured, supervised and disciplined environments. Co-curricular activities give children additional interests, and the sense of community at boarding schools helps to develop individual responsibility. Many families value this aspect of schooling.

#### **Issues raised by independent schools serving rural and regional students**

With reference to the terms of this inquiry three schools from the independent sector that serve rural and regional students, families and communities were approached to provide input to this submission. The schools raised the following issues related to the emotional, physical and financial disadvantage experienced by rural and regional students and school communities:

##### **1. The Scots School, Albury, NSW**

The Scots School Albury is a Uniting Church, independent co-educational day and boarding school that encompasses students from Pre-school years through to Year 12 on the one campus. The history of The Scots School reaches back to the establishment in 1866 of Albury Grammar School, the first independent boys' school in the Albury area. The Scots School was formed in 1972 with the merger of



the Albury Grammar School with Woodstock Presbyterian Girls' School, assuming the new identity of The Scots School Albury. The current enrolment of 521 students includes 113 boarding students and 181 primary students.

Rural and remote students are often disadvantaged by the difficulty or lack of access to educational choice and learning opportunities. Rural and remote students do not experience a level playing field with metropolitan students in ease of access to cultural institutions and social experiences. The financial and time cost factors involved in providing these types of opportunities to their students are unique to rural and regional schools. Transport costs, travel times and time taken from other curriculum areas are all costs imposed on school communities to provide a broad range of educational opportunities.

The cost associated with retaining quality staff and providing them with professional development and learning opportunities is significant. The Scots School estimates that only ten per cent of staff professional development is able to be provided locally; staff must travel to gain access to most professional development opportunities. Costs to rural and regional schools for travel, accommodation and replacement teachers are significant.

For rural or remote families, selecting the right boarding school for their son or daughter is a crucial decision. Providing a boarding house service entails considerable emotional, physical and financial costs on rural and remote students, families and schools, and can be a barrier to gaining access to educational opportunity. The Scots School subsidises the costs of a proportion of its students in order to provide them with this opportunity.

The Scots School offers two single sex boarding houses to accommodate students from Years 7-12 on site; both boys and girls share dining facilities, a common recreation area and many supervised activities. This interaction provides brothers and sisters with ample opportunity to see each other on a regular basis, so that all family members can share in a common educational experience. Through a culture of caring and responsible supervision, boarders at Scots have the opportunity to become part of an extended family, forming friendships for life. The Pastoral Support programs available at the school help our boarders successfully deal with the many challenges involved in making the transition to boarding life, whilst nursing staff are on hand to care for their health requirements. Boarding is not the same as living at home and the expense of providing adequate emotional and physical support to students who are living away from home is costly and largely borne by parents.

Secondary and tertiary educational institutions are often the lifeblood of rural and remote economies. Access or lack of access to educational opportunities for students and families has a flow-on effect to the rest of the community.

## **2. All Souls St Gabriels School, Charters Towers, Qld**

All Souls St Gabriels School, a Christian school within the Anglican tradition, seeks to encourage and educate young men and women who value service to others and strives to develop the whole person - mind, body and spirit. The whole school life and activities are set within this Christian environment.

All Souls School for boys was established by the Bush Brotherhood of St Barnabas in 1920 as a memorial school to the fallen of the First World War. St Gabriels School for girls was established by the Sisters of the Sacred Advent in 1921. Throughout the remainder of the twentieth century the two schools have provided an education for the children of northern Australia. In 2000, ownership of the school passed from the Anglican Diocese of North Queensland to the new All Souls St Gabriels School Inc. The new, vibrant, growing school incorporates the great traditions of the past and endeavors to bring the spirit of service and the development of the whole person to a new generation.

All Souls St Gabriels School understands its role as providing the very best options and access to educational opportunities for students and families across North-West Queensland. Provision of this service can be restricted by the difficulty of attracting quality staff, both teaching and boarding.

Teaching staff with knowledge of current curriculum and pedagogical approaches are vital to maintain and lift educational standards and open doors to help students see what school and post-school educational opportunities are available.

Boarding is seldom, if ever, the same as living at home. The boarding experience is an enriching experience in itself. Boarders learn self-reliance and independence as well as a tolerance of others.

Boarding House life provides:

- an opportunity for development of character, self discipline, leadership and initiative
- an opportunity to develop a set of values based upon respect, consideration, honesty and trust
- an opportunity to learn to cope with the successes and challenges of school life in the supportive, caring and encouraging environment of the House.

Boarding staff aim to create a friendly and pleasant atmosphere in which the student can live happily and develop the necessary social and community skills to be a successful member of society. Employing suitably qualified, live-in staff and maintaining a stable staff is an ongoing challenge.

Out of a school enrolment of 400 students, All Souls St Gabriels has 210 boarders. In the senior school 70 per cent of students are boarders. Around 40 percent of the schools expenses to run the boarding house are met by federal and state funding. Further money is raised through school fundraising. Families of boarding students are also helped by federal and state funding to meet school fees and boarding costs. However, many remote and regional families still struggle to meet these expenses.

Meeting the educational needs of rural and regional students often means arranging for students to travel long distances in order to get to school, or from the school to access educational opportunities and experiences. The financial and time costs involved, natural occurrences such as flooding, and the risk factors for students and staff can restrict or prohibit the access to such options.

### **3. St Philip's College, Alice Springs, NT**

St Philip's is an independent, co-educational day/boarding college run by the Uniting Church. It offers secondary education from Years 7-12. This year St Philip's has an enrolment of 550 students, including 65 boarders. The student body reflects Alice Springs' multi-cultural mix of people, most of whom have come from somewhere else.

Conscious of its geographic isolation, St Philip's works hard to ensure that this reality is not a limiting factor for its students. From Years 7 to 12 students are encouraged to participate in a wide range of activities and opportunities which broaden their horizons. They travel to Darwin and inter-state to take part in sporting, cultural, and academic activities, supported and supervised by College staff. The College's curriculum and extra-curricular programs are designed to appeal to and challenge young people living and learning outside the mainstream of Australian urban society, while at the same time providing them with the key to it. Helping students to access these programs is expensive but the College believes that providing students with educational opportunities is paramount and is committed to breaking the isolation as a matter of social inclusion and social justice.

The expense of recruiting quality long-term and temporary staff, and providing them with high quality professional learning opportunities, requires major financial and time resources. A lack of applicants for positions means that quality staff may need to be brought in from outside of Alice Springs. The financial costs associated with transport, and sometimes accommodation, are significant. Likewise

ensuring that staff have adequate access to professional development means accessing opportunities in other cities which carries both time and financial cost factors.

St Philip's College provides accommodation for up to 75 boarders. The College seeks to offer a boarding experience which is distinctive and varied in order to expose students to educational opportunities outside of their own communities. Boarders come mainly from remote cattle stations and communities throughout Central Australia, from the islands off the north coast of the NT, to Coober Pedy in South Australia and the Kimberleys in WA. 35 per cent of boarders are Indigenous. These young people are the sons and daughters of long-established residents and newcomers to the north Australian outback. A strong international flavour is injected by exchange and GAP students who come from all over the world. Their different backgrounds and life experiences, goals and ambitions create enormous diversity under one roof and provide a tremendously stimulating and challenging environment in which young people can learn and grow.

Boarding House staff are chosen for their ability to recognise and assist with the special problems and challenges which face young people boarding a long way from home. They are also familiar with the special needs of former School of the Air students, and young people who sometimes are more comfortable with adults than with people their own age. Provision of quality facilities and support staff is costly but is seen as a service to enable rural and remote families to access educational opportunities.

## **Conclusion**

The independent sector believes that if all students from remote and regional communities are to have equitable access to educational opportunities and achieve their educational goals, government funding and services should be accessible no matter which school these students attend.

The sector strongly believes that the educational needs of students are central: if young Australians are to achieve to the best of their ability then we need diversity in schooling options and parents need the freedom and financial support to choose among them.

The independent sector strongly supports choice in school education and the right of parents to choose the type of education that best suits the needs of their child. This includes the right of rural and regional families to have equitable access to secondary and post-secondary educational opportunities.

The independent sector acknowledges the importance of government support to address the educational disadvantage of rural and regional students. The sector greatly values government funding that ensures that independent schools can continue to enjoy the autonomy to be able to offer parents from rural and remote communities choice, flexibility and quality in the education of their children.

Bill Daniels  
**Executive Director**  
7 August 2009