



5 March 2020

Chair
Standing Committee on Employment
Education and Training
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Lodged online

**Submission to the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training Inquiry
Education of students in remote communities and
the role of culture, family, community and country in delivering better outcomes**

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into this Inquiry which will focus on the education of students in remote communities. The NCEC is the representative body of Australia's Catholic schools. Working closely with the state and territory Catholic education commissions, the NCEC advocates for and influences policy at the national level on behalf of Australia's Catholic schools.

General comments

1. Australia's Catholic schools have a long history of serving remote communities. Approximately 4% of Catholic schools are located in *remote* and *very remote areas* and educate about 9,400 students. These schools predominantly (though not exclusively) enrol students who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI). For example:
 - a. In Queensland, 11 Catholic schools located in remote or very remote areas enrol a majority of ATSI students. The student cohort at St Michael's School on Palm Island is 100% ATSI students and at St Teresa's College, Abergowrie, over 96% of the student cohort identify as ATSI.
 - b. In the Northern Territory, 5 Catholic schools are located in *remote or very remote* areas and all enrol a majority of ATSI students. St Joseph's Flexible Learning Centre (a special assistance school) in Alice Springs enrolls 100% ATSI students.
2. Many Catholic schools in remote and very remote areas, including our 13 sole provider schools located in Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, were established originally by religious orders. All sole provider schools are majority ATSI schools.

Today, most of these schools are supported by a Catholic diocese and their state or territory Catholic education commission.

3. Catholic education is proud of the role our schools have played and continue to play in educating students and building communities. Catholic education is committed to improving outcomes for students in remote areas, with a continued focus on improving outcomes for ATSI students in Catholic schools. In particular, Catholic school authorities actively contribute to the implementation of the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy*. This strategy calls for quality teaching, a specific emphasis on literacy and numeracy, a focus on attendance and the development of effective partnerships. In Queensland and the Northern Territory, a particular focus for Catholic school authorities is to ensure that ATSI students and families, through active engagement and collaborative partnerships, have equitable access to quality education that is mutually enriching for all.
4. Catholic education is committed to maintaining our schools in *remote and very remote areas*. The presence of the Catholic school throughout Australia is essential to preserving diversity and choice for families. The importance of choice is a principle which enjoys bipartisan support. In acknowledging this principle, the NCEC believes that any recommendations from this inquiry should ensure that choice and diversity in schooling options continues to be supported.
5. The NCEC believes it is important for this Committee to ensure any recommendations from this Committee are agile enough to apply to the many different school settings, including in *remote and very remote* locations. The impacts of remoteness on students and schools are very different depending on the location of the school and the surrounding community.
6. The diversity between remote schools is illustrated by the Catholic schools in Western Australia and the Northern Territory:
 - a. Of the 13 Catholic schools in the Kimberley region of Western Australia five are in the town centres of Broome, Derby, Wyndham and Kununurra. The remainder are further inland in isolated communities and are sole provider schools. Transport to many of these schools is difficult and road connections seasonally unavailable. A small number enrol year 8 to 10 students but such enrolments are typically between 1 – 6 students. Only one school, St Mary’s College, Broome, provides enrolment in senior secondary schooling and the cohort is small. The experience of students in these schools can be quite different from that of other students in *remote or very remote* schools.
 - b. Excluding Darwin schools, all Catholic schools in the Northern Territory are classified as *remote or very remote*. The two Catholic schools on Bathurst Island are only accessible by plane or boat. The Catholic schools at Wadeye (Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Thamarrurr Catholic College) , Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa) and the Daly River (St Francis Xavier) are either cut off completely in the wet season or subject to flooding which makes them inaccessible other than by plane.
7. In many locations, Catholic schools provide, at significant expense, boarding facilities for students from remote locations. These schools are in capital cities, inner regional and outer regional areas. Further reference is made to these schools later in this submission but the

NCEC hopes that the Committee will acknowledge and recommend additional support for these schools including for recurrent and capital costs.

8. In addition to considering remote communities, this inquiry will also consider the education of students in *complex environments*, including those impacted by drought and natural disasters. This significantly broadens the scope of this inquiry. With much of Australia in drought and the recent bushfires, particularly in south eastern Australia, many schools have been impacted. These schools are located in regional (inner and outer) areas and the impacts for these students are quite different to the impacts on students in remote communities. Catholic schools have always supported families and communities in distress and will continue to do so. Catholic education has also welcomed relief packages and additional funding provide by the federal government to support these communities. Further details are included below.
9. The NCEC notes that the government has accepted the recommendations of the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (the Halsey report). Significant work was undertaken to finalise the Halsey report and the Committee would be aware that many other inquiries and reviews into the education of students outside metropolitan areas have occurred. One of the measures that the government has implemented in response to the Halsey report is the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy*. While it may be too soon to consider the operation of this strategy, the NCEC believes that it would be worthwhile for this Committee to assess the effectiveness of the federal government's response to the priorities and recommendations of the Halsey report and many other reviews and inquiries.

Specific comments in response to the terms of reference

A child's journey through early childhood, primary, secondary, vocational and tertiary education in remote communities, like the tri-border region of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

The NCEC is informed that no further opportunities will be provided by this Committee to present oral evidence. We understand roundtables will be held and school tours organised by the Committee. Catholic Education looks forward to participating in the proposed roundtable discussions and will present, by reference to specific schools and communities, examples of journeys in remote schools. In the meantime, we present some detail about one of our very remote schools in Western Australia.

Luurnpa Catholic School

Catholic Education Western Australia: Broome Diocese

Luurnpa Catholic School is in a very remote region of Western Australia 611 km south of Wyndham, 910 km ESE of Broome and about 100km from the Northern Territory border, near the Great Sandy and Tanami Deserts. During the wet season, access roads are often impassable. The school is located in Balgo and serves the Wirrimanu Aboriginal community of about 400 people. With an ICSEA of only

715 the school services a small cohort of highly disadvantaged students. The school consists of 97 students, 11 FTE teaching staff, 8.6 FTE non-teaching staff and a Trade Training Centre for metals and hospitality.

The school caters for students from PP to year 10. Years 8 to 10 have smaller cohorts and there is limited provision for senior secondary studies. The Trade Training Centre provides some VET courses but the difficulty of securing qualified staff and the lack of industry placements means that completion of a full credential is extremely difficult. Students wishing to undertake year 11 and 12 studies are forced to seek boarding opportunities in a regional centre or in Perth or Darwin.

The school's remoteness and size pose a number of educational challenges. Attracting and retaining experience staff is difficult. Providing professional learning opportunities is also challenging as travel to and from the school involves charter flights. On-line learning is not always suited to many staff and students and internet access is often unreliable.

The community faces a number of social issues which present difficulties for the school and the educational journey of students. Since 2018, the region has experienced over 10 youth suicides. The vicarious trauma experienced by communities and schools is immense. Many students experience dysfunctional family situations and may face mental health and associated issues. Attendance and engagement of students is an ongoing challenge. CEWA will soon be funding an additional youth worker and deputy principal to address some of these issues. The school continues to direct efforts in early years learning, recognising that the education journey is significantly enhanced by the platform established in PP to year 3. Building relationships between the school and parents/community is also an important aspect of the school. This often involves the employment of local community members to undertake the liaison role.

Like many other remote sole provider schools, education at Luurnpa Catholic School is an extremely complex requiring flexible approaches and considerable additional system resourcing and cross-subsidisation.

Key barriers to the education journey, including the effects of environmental factors such as drought on families and communities.

There are many barriers to education in remote communities and complex environments. These include: limited resources and facilities; higher community cost structures; cultural issues; family and stability issues; unemployment; health issues; staffing issues; communication costs and inefficiencies; small cohorts and challenges for sole provider schools; access to secondary schooling and post-school training and transient populations. In relation to remote communities, we have highlighted some specific challenges and their impacts below.

Disconnection/education which is relevant

Students from remote communities are directly affected by issues of isolation beyond geography which impact social connectedness, global understandings and the ability of children/families to see themselves as citizens of a wider community. Government policies and advances in education can

take longer to filter through to remote communities which can lead to feelings of insecurity and powerlessness as a result and often feel invisible to the wider Australia. There can be a lack of a deeper appreciation of community cultural differences, particularly in the area of communication. For example, concepts relevant to one community (city environments) do not translate well to remote communities. It is the experience of our schools that consultation between school authorities and the particular local community is vital for our schools to be effective.

Adequately trained teachers who are fully supported to educate

Support for educators is a challenge for remote communities. Teachers in remote communities struggle to access collaboration opportunities with other teachers. Often there is a small number of staff. In our view, teacher education does not prepare pre-service teachers for managing the social context of remote schools and communities. Catholic school authorities have structures in place to assist new teachers with the transition to working in remote communities but without systemic structures, new teachers may erroneously rely on pedagogical practices which are ineffective in remote communities.

Transience

A key issue facing remote communities, particularly in the tri-border regions of Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory is the transience of populations and the difficulties of providing continuity of education. This applies to both early years learning, where the cornerstones of literacy and numeracy are established, and senior secondary education which is critical to the transition to post-school options. The NCEC believes government should continue to work with communities to ensure that children stay connected to learning across all education sectors and simplify the exchange of information between schools.

Health problems

One acknowledged problem is otitis media. The Queensland Catholic Education Commission and has partnered with the Queensland government in the *Deadly Kids Deadly Futures* program to try to address this problem. Health problems are exacerbated by limited access to support services such as allied health providers of speech pathology, audiology or occupational therapy. This has affected communities across Queensland from those in the most remote areas such as the Gulf communities to those close to Brisbane such as Murgon and Kingaroy.

Technology

Difficulties with internet connections are a constant challenge in remote communities. Inadequate technology results in a level of education that is not comparable with city students. In addition, if there is a lack of devices for student use this affects the access to resources and other educational tools. This issue is intensified given that the provision of curriculum diversity is often dependent on online learning.

Drought

The NCEC looks forward to speaking with the Committee about the challenges experienced by students in Catholic schools located in drought affected areas. All Catholic schools have practices in place to support the wellbeing of students and their families in times of drought and other difficulties and provide fee relief where required. The NCEC has acknowledged and welcomed the significant contribution that the federal government has provided to families impacted by the drought. This additional funding has gone directly to fee relief and has enabled our schools to continue to offer the highest level of support to all our families which in turn benefits the whole community.

The role of culture and country in a child's learning.

Culture plays an essential role in the learning of children in remote communities. There is a high level of misunderstanding by non-ATSI Australians when it comes to community and family structures which often leads to communication difficulties when dealing with the learning and wellbeing of a remote student. This cultural awareness needs to be fully understood before effective learning can take place on country.

Many of our schools have implemented strategies to address the role of culture and country. The Diocese of Toowoomba Catholic Schools has addressed this in its *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Plan*. The Diocese organises an annual leadership camp where students can connect with and celebrate their cultural heritage and has implemented cultural training of staff. Brisbane Catholic Education's *Ngutana-Lui Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Centre* hosts hundreds of students each year to raise awareness of, and to share in ATSI culture. The *Queensland Catholic Indigenous Education Conference* in 2019 highlighted the importance of cultural competence. Keynote speakers, including Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann and CEWA's Sharon Davis, emphasised the vital role of culture while several workshops shared best practice in promoting cultural competence. Many Catholic School authorities provide professional learning opportunities for staff to build their cultural competence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, with Brisbane Catholic Education providing two programs, *Crossing Cultures - Hidden Histories* and *Looking Forward Looking Back*, and Townsville Catholic Education offering a retreat on country as examples.

Catholic Education Northern Territory collaborates with Charles Darwin University to deliver the *Growing Our Own Project*. This project works with assistant teachers who would like to undertake pre-service teacher training in the school they are working at. This project has had a high success rate with local community members becoming teachers in their community school. There is an ongoing need for more local representation on school executives so that the subtleties of culture and country are holistically reflected in the mission and vision of each community school.

Catholic Education Western Australia has identified the important role of Aboriginal teacher assistants (ATA) both in the learning and teaching process but also in community liaison, including with parents and the wider community. Many schools preference Aboriginal people for other roles

including administrative support and general maintenance. Youth workers are also important in school-student-community connections.

Community and family structures that support a child's education and their attendance at school.

Catholic schools see their role as a partnership between school and home. In remote communities particularly, the role of the student's family and community is essential to effective student learning. Our schools in remote areas, particularly sole provider schools, strive to develop close ties with families and community and engage them as much as possible in their child's education.

Effective government initiatives, past and present, that support remote communities to enable greater educational outcomes, including those that have improved attainment in literacy and numeracy.

Catholic schools in Western Australia have implemented effective strategies with the support of the federal government. These include the *Indigenous Advancement Strategy* and the former *Trade Training Centre initiative*. The Trade Training Initiative resulted in four Kimberley schools benefitting from a training facility which also assisted the wider community.

To address early years learning, the *Aboriginal Families as First Educators (AFAFE)* program was introduced to involve parents in pre-school education. This program exists in a number of WA Catholic schools, including some in the Kimberley. A formal review by Charles Darwin University has highlighted many of the achievements of this program.

In terms of staff development, funds continue to be directed towards the *ATA Upskilling* program which provides opportunities for ATAs to achieve their Certificate III and IV qualifications and ultimately, a possible transition to tertiary education degrees. This recognises the importance of qualified Aboriginal staff in Kimberley schools.

All Catholic schools in remote and very remote communities operate pre-schools which enable a more effective transition to primary school. Trading Training Centres have also been built at Wadeye and Bathurst Island.

ABSTUDY and Catholic boarding schools

ABSTUDY is generally an effective government initiative that assists ATSI students to attend school away from their community. Increasingly an education in a boarding school is chosen as a pathway for ATSI students in remote areas. There are currently 55 Catholic boarding schools which enrol over 2,400 ATSI boarding students. The NCEC believes it is important that the Committee consider the operation of ABSTUDY and its impact on boarding students as recent decisions are impacting the ability of our Catholic boarding schools to continue to educate ATSI students in our boarding schools.

Some Catholic systemic boarding schools (as opposed to high fee Catholic independent schools) educate high numbers of ATSI students, particularly in the Northern Territory and North

Queensland. These schools experience many challenges and a significant one is covering the full cost of providing an education to an individual ATSI student. Costs in our systemic boarding schools for our ATSI students include not only “in class costs” and other incidentals such as school equipment and excursions but also the cost of accommodation and 24-hour supervision. In addition, our schools inform us that many individual ATSI boarding students arrive at school without adequate equipment for the boarding school setting. In many cases, our schools are required to fund and provide the basic requirements of living away from home for these students.

Recently there have been a number of changes to ABSTUDY which are impacting the ability of our boarding schools to operate effectively particularly in North Queensland. These include:

- **Alterations to eligibility criteria have reduced funding** (including new means testing rules) - ABSTUDY previously provided a boarding supplement for under 16 students. Previously this boarding school supplement was NOT subject to means testing This supplement has now been included in the general ABSTUDY payment and means testing occurs when family income exceeds the approved amount.
- **Altered attendance requirements are impacting funding-** Previously, the under 16 boarding supplement was received if a student was present at school in terms 1 and 3 on the day of the submission of the claim. Their attendance over the rest of the terms didn't matter. This payment was receipted to a separate ledger account. With the changes to ABSTUDY, students have to be present at week 2 and week 8 of each term to receive the full entitlement. In effect this is eight census dates a year. At Mount St Bernard College, Herberton in North Queensland, attendance by boarding students declines during the year and the new payment cycle is having a negative impact. Some issues affecting students returning in time or leaving early are:
 - Students from very isolated areas have staggered travel.
 - A no-show incurs a long delay in ABSTUDY re-issuing travel. No-shows are common.
 - *Sorry Business* and cultural activities have students from a particular community away for several days.
 - Suspensions and exclusions.
- **Operational challenges-** Our schools also report that administration of ABSTUDY is impacting students and potential students. The process is arduous and difficult and requires the tenacity of organisations, young persons and their parents / guardian / family and school to ensure that the ABSTUDY is in place, all documentation is provided, and that students can access education. There are delays in the processing ABSTUDY applications and travel cannot be arranged until the ABSTUDY is in place. This can lead to further disengagement by young people. Our schools are trying to prevent barriers to entry (and re-entry) to education but changes to ABSTUDY (which is and has been an effective government program) are presenting many challenges.

Overall, Catholic systemic boarding schools, particularly Mount St Bernard College at Herberton and our special assistance school Holy Spirit College at Cooktown, are doing excellent work in closing the gap with a range of innovative and supportive educational programs but they need consistency from

ABSTUDY in the application of guidelines, adequacy of funding, and a supportive understanding of the particular needs of remote families.

While it is acknowledged by the NCEC that our boarding schools attract generous recurrent funding and a significant number of students have access to ABSTUDY, many of our boarding schools (for example, our schools in Herberton and Cooktown) operate at a financial deficit because of the additional needs of their student cohort, particularly in the application of additional health, tutoring and special programs, and wellbeing support. Without access to programs like ABSTUDY and without the cross-subsidisation of other Cairns Catholic schools, Catholic schools at Herberton and Cooktown would not be able to fulfil their mission. For example, to remain financially viable Herberton required annual cross subsidisation (a transfer of Commonwealth recurrent grants from other Cairns Catholic Schools) of more than \$500,000.

Innovative approaches to workforce, including recruitment, professional learning, retention and support, and lessons from communities that could be more generally applied.

Innovative approaches to workforce, including recruitment, professional learning, retention and support, and lessons from communities feature in Queensland Catholic education. Several Catholic school authorities have established Reconciliation Action Plans including a target of increased employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and ways of ensuring such employees feel welcome and valued. Many schools provide cultural competence courses for staff working with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cohorts, and particularly in teacher induction programs. More, however, is needed in this space.

Access and support to deliver the Australian Curriculum (including STEM) in a flexible way to meet local learning needs and interests of remote students, including examples of innovative ways in which the curriculum is being delivered in remote schools.

There is a constant need for the Australian Curriculum and end of Year 12 credentialing to be delivered to remote community students in a realistic and innovative way. Australia has been educating young people in remote communities for over a century, yet we still struggle in terms of ensuring successful student pathways to further education and the world of work.

In many of our remote schools, an approach to schooling which emphasises a test-driven curriculum, does not honour indigenous learning. Catholic education believes it is important to consult with each local community to ensure that they are able to contribute to their children's education and our local schools harness the wisdom of the local people. At the same time, like schools throughout Australia, teacher expertise is an issue in many remote locations and the lack of resources in the practical applications of STEM is a further confounding factor. The delivery of VET in STEM areas is also a significant issue.

In terms of curriculum delivery, Catholic Education Western Australia has developed an online platform, *Virtual School Network* or *ViSN*. All schools can access this program and it operates in a similar but enhanced manner to the distance education models offered to government schools in

states and territories. Some of the improvements to *ViSN* include but are not limited to: partnerships with schools in course development and delivery; professional learning provided to teachers involved; a community learning approach for students within a school and across schools; and strong mentoring of students.

ViSN is currently focussing on years 11 and 12 and while most schools have small cohorts, the model will be progressively adopted by many types of schools. The online delivery model requires that students develop independent learning skills with school-based staff providing support where required. The model – and others like it – is particularly useful for students who may have an interrupted school year and/or where students are at different stages in their learning. Face to face time-sequenced models of learning do not necessarily meet the needs of all students. The online learning model is also important in providing sufficient choice within the Australian Curriculum.

CEWA believes there is a role for government to support this sort of model. In Western Australia access to the government equivalent model is limited and costly.

Successful pathways to ensure students have the knowledge and skills they need to enter further education and the workforce.

This is a significant issue for remote locations. Few, if any, vocational training facilities exist and there is a limited industry/business base to support traineeships and work placements. Where a mining company is located nearby, some possibilities for training may exist although minimum age restrictions apply. Trade Training Centres exist although a significant issue for schools which have access to them, is the availability and the cost of suitable training. In the case of the Kimberley region, training facilities are restricted to two main centres at Broome and Kununurra. In many cases, families find it difficult to send and board senior secondary students at these centres. Where it is possible, they will often send them to a larger centre such as Geraldton, Perth or Darwin.

Many Catholic systems, like CEWA, have aspirational strategies for students in remote (and rural) areas, particularly in raising participation and completion levels in senior secondary schooling, leading to more meaningful post-school transitions. To enable this to occur, students need to be provided with greater and affordable access to vocational training. Some schools face challenges in accessing TAFE, especially those in remote communities. Schools are mostly unable to deliver VET themselves because of a lack of suitably qualified staff and equipment. There is a role for the federal government to widen VET access.

An example of an employment pathway initiated by Catholic Education in the Northern Territory is the *Growing Our Own* program. In partnership with Charles Darwin University, *Growing Our Own* aims to develop a quality, local Indigenous teacher workforce by supporting Indigenous assistant teachers to become teachers. Catholic Education can report that 11 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.

Please contact us on the details below if you require any further information or clarification of the matters raised in this submission.



National Catholic Education Commission contact details

Should you have any further queries in relation to this submission, please contact:

Jacinta Collins Executive Director

Telephone: 02 8229 0800

Email: jacinta.collins@ncec.catholic.edu.au

Patrice Daly Policy Advisor

Telephone: 02 8229 0800

Email: patrice.daly@ncec.catholic.edu.au