

Monday 18 January 2021

The Hon J Frydenberg MP
Treasurer
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2601
Lodged online

Dear Treasurer

2021-2022 Federal Budget Submission: National Catholic Education Commission

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) is pleased to present a submission to the Australian Government for the 2021-2022 Federal Budget.

Background

The NCEC is the national representative body of Australia's Catholic schools. Working closely with the state and territory Catholic Education Commissions, the NCEC advocates for and develops policy and strategy at the national level for Australia's Catholic schools.

The NCEC acknowledges the federal government's ongoing support for Australia's Catholic schools. Australia's 1,755 Catholic schools educate one in five, or 777,044 students and directly employ more than 100,000 Australians. This makes Catholic schools the nation's largest provider of education outside government.

Catholic education provides an affordable, quality education to hundreds of thousands of Australian children, at a lower cost to the taxpayer than if those same children were educated in a government school. Catholic schools deliver significant budget savings to government, relieve pressure on government schools and provide families with a much valued choice when it comes to their children's education.

Current circumstances

During 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic dealt Australia unprecedented challenges. The sudden occurrence of the pandemic had many negative economic and social impacts that may take years to reverse and resolve. Schools found themselves in unfamiliar circumstances and responded quickly, positively and sensitively, often breaking new ground. We saw the dedication of staff and school leaders as they forged creative solutions to continue offering engaging and productive learning to their students.

As we move through 2021 and beyond, the role of government is critical to restoring the economic and social situation for Australia.

The federal government has elected to stimulate the economy and enhance the social circumstances by investment in capital projects to sustain employment, lift people's confidence levels and re-energise the economy. A second approach has involved targeted support of those who have been stood down from employment or had hours of work reduced.

Catholic education's contribution to stimulating the Australian economy

Catholic education is well-placed to support the government's agenda of stimulating the economy and enhancing the social circumstances of Australian society.

Across Australia, in every state and territory, and in each electorate, there are Catholic schools that would benefit from capital investment. Capital for Catholic schools comes primarily from private sources, usually parent contributions from building funds, with additional support from state and/or federal grants. Parents and families of students at Catholic schools have contributed significant capital expenditure to Australia's Catholic schools. For example, in 2018, families contributed \$1.3 billion to the costs of capital for Catholic schools.

One of the strong characteristics of the capital investment in Catholic schools is its impact on the local economy. Most Catholic schools are community-based, with strong local profiles that engender loyalty from parents and families. This means investment is generally spent locally and impacts positively on the economic and social development of local communities.

Combined with the contributions from families, capital investment by the federal government will have a multiplier effect, maximising the return on investment.

The Catholic education sector across Australia has shovel-ready projects estimated to be worth \$1.02 billion in 2021-2022. Follow up projects, estimated to be in the order of \$3-4 billion are likely for 2022-2024.

- 1. The NCEC recommends that the Australian Government partner with Catholic schools to immediately inject much-needed stimulus funding into local economies through an investment in capital works via additional Commonwealth capital grants to enable shovel-ready projects to proceed without delay.**

Early childhood education

The investment in early childhood education is recognised as an efficient use of education funds due to the positive impacts on young children at the critical developmental stage prior to formal schooling. Research based on developmental indexes (such as the AEDI), suggest that early childhood learning can particularly assist children who are rated at the lower end of the indexes.

While universal access for four-year-old children has been the policy position for successive federal governments, there is evidence that the funding for universal access is inconsistently applied by state and territory governments. For example, Catholic early childhood centres in the ACT do not currently receive any federal government funding.

The NCEC supports funding for universal access and would like to see it applied consistently across states and territories and sectors for the year before school, with an eventual transition to two years before compulsory schooling. Ideally, communities that suffer disadvantage would be offered priority in the delivery of services.

High-quality early childhood education is dependent upon the provision of well-trained teachers, especially for lower SES areas and disadvantaged communities. In particular, the NCEC supports the provision of targeted funding through grants and subsidies to train Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as early childhood educators supporting their local communities.

The Catholic sector, as a non-government body, is ready and willing to expand the delivery of early childhood education in response to increasing interest from families if funding can be assured. Research has already been undertaken to determine the level of demand in different communities. The Catholic sector has provided billions of dollars of capital development in the school sector, however the capacity to provide new facilities for early childhood education is significantly restricted. To provide urgently needed services the sector seeks federal government support for capital grants for early childhood education facilities. This will facilitate choice, access and continuity for parents seeking a Catholic education for their children.

- 2. The NCEC recommends that the Australian Government allocates funding across all sectors to ensure universal early childhood education for four-year-old children. It further recommends funding three-year-old students with a priority given to communities that suffer disadvantage.**
- 3. The NCEC recommends the Australian Government target funding to provide trained early childhood teachers in lower SES areas and disadvantaged communities, focusing on the training of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.**
- 4. The NCEC recommends the Australian Government provides capital funding support for early childhood education facilities on Catholic school sites.**

Regional, Rural and Remote

Several recent reports have highlighted the challenges associated with operating schools in regional, rural and remote locations. Notably the House of Representative Inquiry: *Education in Remote and Complex Environments*, offers observations about schooling in remote areas.¹

In 2020, the COVID-19 crisis has impacted across all areas of Australia, additionally, in the last three years, regional, rural and remote areas faced the challenges of significant drought, flooding and bushfires in some areas.

¹

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Employment_Education_and_Training/RemoteEducation/Report

The enduring challenges of teacher and school leader shortages, high costs associated with professional learning, and specialist services for students prevail in regional, rural and remote areas. In 2021 and 2022, supporting student well-being will be paramount. Students from families who have experienced extraordinary stress during 2020 will have to be identified and offered additional appropriate professional support. The Catholic sector which has 40% of its schools in regional, rural and remote areas has already commenced the task of supporting the well-being of vulnerable students. However, additional resources from government for 2021-2022 are necessary to provide the level of support required.

- 5. The NCEC recommends the Australian Government assist schools in regional, rural and remote areas with the provision of extra support services to maintain the well-being of students and staff.**

Boarding facilities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

Of particular interest to the NCEC is the provision of additional recurrent and capital funding for boarding facilities in schools in regional, rural and remote areas. Many of the students attending boarding schools in regional areas, particularly students from indigenous communities, have limited secondary education opportunities in their local community settings and are dependent on boarding schools to provide a viable option. Regional, rural and remote boarding schools face many more additional costs and challenges than boarding schools in city locations. With limited private contribution from families often experiencing disadvantage, the schools struggle to provide this essential service.

Investment in boarding facilities in regional, rural and remote areas would provide additional support for those disadvantaged by the tyranny of distance and lack of opportunity.

- 6. The NCEC recommends the Australian Government ensure that Catholic boarding schools are provided additional funding to ensure they can continue to sustain a critical service for students. Particular consideration should be given to boarding schools in regional areas of the country which face many additional compounding challenges to boarding schools in metropolitan areas.**

The NCEC appreciated the opportunity to make this submission and should further information be required, please do not hesitate to contact me (jacinta.collins@ncec.catholic.edu.au).

Yours sincerely



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