



Friday 27 January 2023

The Hon Dr Jim Chalmers MP  
Treasurer  
Parliament House CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Treasurer

**2023-24 Federal Budget Submission  
National Catholic Education Commission**

The National Catholic Education Commission is pleased to present a submission to the Australian Government for the 2023-24 Budget.

**Background**

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) is the peak body for Catholic education in Australia and is responsible for the national coordination and representation of Catholic schools and school authorities.

Working collaboratively with state and territory Catholic education commissions, NCEC advocates through effective liaison with the federal, state and territory governments and key national education bodies. NCEC's role is to ensure the needs of Catholic schools are served through funding, legislation and policy.

Australia's 1,755 Catholic schools educate one in five, or over 785,000 students, and employ over 102,000 Australians. This makes Catholic schools the nation's largest provider of education outside of government.

**CATHOLIC EDUCATION PRIORITIES**

**1. Extension of the Non-Government Reform Support Fund beyond 31 December 2023**

The NCEC strongly supports the extension of the Non-Government Reform Support Fund (NGRSF) beyond 2023 to enable Catholic education authorities to maintain support for the ongoing and emerging national priorities in school reform in line with the extension of the current National School Reform Agreement.

The NGRSF commenced on 1 January 2018, providing \$200 million over the five years from 2018 to 2022. The 2022-23 Budget committed an additional \$40 million to extend the NGRSF until 31 December 2023 and align the funding to the term of the National School Reform Agreement.

The NGRSF provides funding to non-government representative bodies (NGRBs) to support non-government schools in the implementation of national and state and territory school reform policy initiatives.

NCEC supports eight Catholic NGRBs nationally, working with them to implement agreed national and state-based reform initiatives.

On 16 December 2022, the Minister for Education, the Hon Jason Clare MP, announced that the current National School Reform Agreement (NSRA), commenced on 1 January 2019, will be extended for a further 12 months until 31 December 2024.

The extension of the NGRSF for a further 12 months to 31 December 2024, in line with the NSRA, would provide the necessary financial assistance to continue the delivery of agreed national and state reforms and the Minister for Education's priorities as outlined in the current agreement.

Catholic education authorities successfully support our schools in implementing Commonwealth priorities.

In Clause 68 of the National Schools Reform Agreement the government has committed to provide funding for non-government representatives bodies (NGRBs) to support non-government schools in the implementation of these agreements.

The Catholic NGRBs work with the schools and systems they represent to strengthen the Commonwealth's three national priorities, namely:

- improve the quality of information on the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) to improve the efficiency and integrity of the data collection
- transition of NAPLAN (National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy) to online delivery
- improve governance and financial management practices in non-government schools to strengthen financial viability, improve business decision making and build resilience to mitigate unforeseen circumstances.

There has been a significant increase in the number of students identified as having a disability since the implementation of the new NCCD model in 2018. This is a result of teachers across schools having increased knowledge and ability to assess and identify students with disabilities using the new model. Training needs to continue to support overall consistency in the quality of NCCD data, both within jurisdictions and at a national level.

The ability of Catholic education authorities to continue to provide reform initiatives, activities and projects would be drastically restricted without the financial support provided through the NGRSF.

### Recommendation

That the Non-Government Reform Support Fund be extended to 31 December 2024, to maintain alignment with the current National School Reform Agreement. This will enable Non-Government Representative Bodies to continue to support the delivery of current national and state and territory school reform policy priorities.

## **2. Increased Capital Funding**

In making the choice of a Catholic education, families take on more than 26 per cent of the annual cost of their children's education.

Catholic school families also contribute more than 90 per cent of the costs required to support school buildings and other capital works in Catholic schools.

An integral part of the mission of Catholic education is to provide universal, affordable schooling which is accessible to all across Australia, to provide families with a genuine choice of a faith-based school in their area.

The NCEC acknowledges the ongoing support of the Australian Government in the funding of Catholic schools. The Capital Grants Program for non-government schools provides funding to assist non-government school communities to improve capital infrastructure.

The Commonwealth Capital Grants Program is indexed annually, however the quantum of funding available under this program has not changed in any material way for many years.

Schools must be equipped to offer quality, contemporary teaching and learning. There is pressure on existing schools to renew ageing capital infrastructure and/or to expand capacity, and in some areas to build new schools in response to student population growth. In the fastest growing communities land is at a premium with developers competing with Catholic education authorities and frequently outbidding Catholic schools for land acquisitions.

It has become increasingly difficult for Catholic education to balance the needs of existing schools for refurbishments and upgrades to capital infrastructure with the responsibility to build new schools in high-demand communities.

### **Recommendation**

That the Capital Grants Program funding for non-government schools be increased to facilitate the construction of new and expansions of existing, low-fee schools in areas of high population growth.

## **3. Affordability and School Choice**

The NCEC strongly supports the right of families to choose a Catholic education for their children.

Freedom of religion is a universal human right which is recognised in international treaties and agreements such as Article 18 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#) which was ratified by Australia in 1972. Freedom of religion includes the establishment of religious schools and the right of parents to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in line with their own religious beliefs.

In Australia today, the cost of a school education is around \$12,500 per primary student and \$15,700 per secondary student each year. For Catholic students, governments only fund around 74 per cent of this cost with families making up the shortfall through school fees.

The level of government funding to non-government schools is determined by the Capacity to Contribute which is means-tested according to family income. A school's CTC score affects the amount of base recurrent funding the school attracts from the Australian Government under the *Australian Education Act 2013* from between 10 per cent (minimum base funding) to 80 per cent (maximum based funding).

Catholic education should not be restricted to families who can afford fees. One of the most unique and valuable features of Australia's education system is the wide-ranging availability of genuine, affordable school choice.

Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of [the Child](#), to which Australia has ratified, commits to a primary education that is compulsory and available free to all; and encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, that are available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need.

Successive Australian governments have committed themselves to the principle of providing families with real school choice based on these principles.

The NCEC strongly supports the continuation of existing needs-based recurrent funding arrangements. The 10-year funding agreement delivers certainty to school communities and enables families the choice of an affordable choice of a Catholic education across Australia.

While the Capacity to Contribute model is more equitable than previous models, the NCEC supports advancing a review and refinement of Capacity to Contribute (CTC) settings to 2024, to ensure the fairest funding formula is in place for all families and communities.

#### Recommendation

To advance the review of the Capacity to Contribute formula to 2024 to ensure the fairest funding formula for all families and communities.

### **1. Increased support for the Early Years**

The NCEC welcomes the five-year extension to the Preschool Reform Funding Agreement to provide access to Early Childhood Education and Care services for all young children.

However, NCEC seeks the expansion of this agreement for two years of quality preschool before school, including three-year-old children for three days a week led by a qualified early childhood teacher.

Extending preschool to three-year-old children will allow educators to identify children at risk of educational disadvantage, including those not meeting developmental milestones or demonstrating low pre-literacy skills. Fifteen hours or two days a week of early learning is not sufficient for children identified as being at risk before they start school. Thirty hours would allow participation over a greater number of days (three to five days) which would support better learning outcomes.

## Recommendation

That the Preschool Reform Funding Agreement be extended, to provide quality preschool programs to all three-year-old and four-year-old children (for two years) prior to commencing compulsory school.

To increase provision in the year before school from 15 hours a week to 30 hours a week for children at risk of educational disadvantage.

### **4. Closing the Gap implementation plans and boarding facilities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders students**

Catholic education operates around 48 boarding schools that educate 2,435 (FTE) Indigenous boarding students across Australia – more than 26,000 Catholic school students identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Catholic boarding schools serve a diversity of regional, remote and metropolitan students, though the majority are located in regional Australia and are low fee. Students from regional and remote Australia also make up a significant proportion of the student population at Catholic boarding schools located in capital cities. Catholic boarding schools also support a significant proportion of disadvantaged Indigenous students, many of whom study away from home due to limited educational choices in their own communities.

There are additional costs and challenges in providing ongoing boarding services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These costs include not only living and educational support, but also health, wellbeing and cultural support and costs associated with maintaining links to home communities. For boarding schools where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities make up all or most of the student body, these additional costs threaten the financial viability of providing boarding school options.

In 2021-22 the Indigenous Boarding Providers grants program provided \$17.3 million to support 50 boarding providers with a high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in 2023. The NCEC would like to see this funding increased and extended for the 2023-24 financial year.

Australian Government recurrent funding for boarding schools only covers in-school costs and does not extend to supporting the provision of boarding. Boarding schools provide a range of services and support for their students and school communities for which they receive no government funding. These services often include providing additional care, support and health services 24 hours a day, transport costs, and additional staff who are specialists in disadvantaged and trauma-affected communities. To ensure these services remain affordable for families, Catholic school boarding fee charges are often lower than the cost of providing the services, meaning boarding operations often run at a deficit.

As an example, St John's Catholic College in Darwin has set up a health centre to support the health, education, employment and social outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The college health centre operates without government funding with significant operating costs. It recorded 1,296 students visits in 2021 and 1,814 student visits in 2022. In addition, the St John's Health Centre facilitates numerous visits to external health professionals to provide care and support for their students. This program is a substantial part of the school's program which is entirely funded by private sources (fees and other school community support).

Investment in recurrent and capital funding for boarding schools that educate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders students would address Closing the Gap targets by supporting the ongoing education and wellbeing of students helping to alleviate these financial concerns.

#### Recommendations

That Catholic boarding schools across a range of settings (metropolitan, rural and remote) be provided with additional recurrent and capital funding to ensure they can continue to sustain critical services (e.g. allied health services, student health assessments, individual management plans) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

- Particular consideration be given to boarding schools in regional and remote locations which face many additional challenges. These schools also require additional support services to enhance the wellbeing of students and staff.

That the number of Indigenous boarding schools receiving funding be increased and the 2021-22 Indigenous Boarding Providers grants program be extended to the 2023-24 financial year.

### **5. Implementation of the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan**

Catholic education is working closely with the Australian Government and other education stakeholders to address the challenge of teacher demand, supply and retention.

The NCEC has contributed to the development of the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan. A major objective of the plan is to increase the number of people entering and remaining in the profession.

Priorities for immediate action have been developed that focus on improving teacher supply, strengthening initial teacher education, keeping the teachers in the profession, elevating the profession and better understanding future teacher workforce needs.

NCEC welcomes the funding commitments made to date by the Commonwealth, in particular the provision of \$159 million for an additional 4,036 Commonwealth supported places in education across the 2023-24 financial year, including for sub-bachelor and bachelor level courses in areas of early childhood, primary and secondary education.

The Australian Government will also invest an extra \$68.3 million in the High Achieving Teachers Program to deliver up to 2,260 new teachers over the next four years.

The additional places in this program will be used to pilot new ways to get teachers into schools most in need and to attract more maths and science teachers and more Indigenous teachers into schools. Jurisdictions and sectors interested in participating in the trial will work with the Australian Government to commence pilots in the second half of 2023.

NCEC seeks additional support for Catholic schools to participate in this pilot program.

The Australian Government will also invest \$25 million with interested states and territories to pilot innovative approaches to reduce teacher workload through a Workload Reduction Fund to maximise the value of teachers' time.

There will be an emphasis on government schools facing systemic disadvantage. Many low socio-economic status Catholic schools are interested in participating in the pilot program.

#### Recommendations

That funding be extended to Catholic schools to participate in the pilot program to pilot new ways to:

- a. place teachers into schools most in need, attract more maths and science teachers and Indigenous teachers into schools, and
- b. reduce teacher workload.

NCEC appreciates the opportunity to make this submission for the upcoming Federal Budget. Should further information be required, please do not hesitate to email me via

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Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in purple ink that reads "Jacinta Collins". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jacinta Collins  
Executive Director