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## **Record number of students in Catholic schools shows support for faith-based education**

New Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data reveals a record number of students in Catholic schools and support for faith-based education, National Catholic Education executive director Jacinta Collins said today.

“Ten new Catholic schools opened across Australia over the past 12 months with 1,759 Catholic schools educating nearly 794,000 or one in five Australian students and employing over 104,500 staff,” Ms Collins said.

“The latest Census data shows Catholic education remains the major provider of education outside of government, with enrolments growing from 766,088 students in 2017 to 785,396 students last year, and 793,729 in 2022.

“As the largest provider of faith-based schooling in Australia, this growth shows the great importance Catholic school families place on choosing a school that meets the needs of their child and reflects their values and beliefs.

“We’ve seen this growth in all faith-based non-government schools across Australia in recent years, with enrolments increasing 7.7 per cent from 2017-2022. Overall enrolments in faith-based schools increased from 1,211,242 in 2017 to 1,304,909, according to the 2022 ABS data,” Ms Collins said.

Ms Collins said the growth shows the value Australian families place on faith-based education.

“It is a timely reminder that school choice is a highly valued component of the Australian education system and parents want an authentic faith-based education for their children.”

Ms Collins said Catholic education is extremely disappointed with the proposed reforms outlined by Australian Law Reform Commission’s (ALRC) in its current inquiry into religious educational institutions and anti-discrimination laws, which threaten the ability of faith-based schools to be authentic.

“The proposed changes would remove or severely restrict the ability of Catholic schools to prioritise the employment of staff and enrolment of students from our faith background, or to operate and teach in accordance with our Catholic ethos,” Ms Collins said.

A survey on school perceptions showed 63% of the general population, 82% of Catholics and 79% of Catholic school parents believe religious schools should be 'entitled to require employees to act in their roles that uphold the ethos and values of that faith' and the school should be free to favour hiring employees who share these values. (Utting, 2021).

"As the first and foremost educators of their children, the right of parents to choose a school based on their religious beliefs is recognised in international human rights law, and Australian laws need to reflect this right," Ms Collins said.

"Catholic schools are highly valued and respected in the community and should be free to continue to be Catholic."