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Senator Wendy Askew
Chair
Community Affairs Legislation Committee
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Senator Askew,

Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Extend Family Assistance to ABSTUDY Secondary School Boarding Students Aged 16 and Over) Bill 2019

AHISA and ABSA write in support of enactment of the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Extend Family Assistance to ABSTUDY Secondary School Boarding Students Aged 16 and Over) Bill 2019 ('the Bill').

Hansard of Senate proceedings for 1 August 2019 indicates that the Selection of Bills Committee referred the Bill to the Community Affairs Legislation Committee 'to examine the interaction between the proposed Bill and the continued viability and adequate funding of local schools and educational opportunities in communities'.

AHISA and ABSA invite the Committee to take the following points into consideration as part of their review process.

1. Boarding schools and educational opportunity

The Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) notes that there are over 2240 Indigenous students boarding in some 125 independent schools in Australia:

Half of these students attend schools with either very large numbers or a high concentration of Indigenous boarders. Many come from remote communities where primary level education is the only schooling locally available and they have to leave their communities in order to undertake secondary studies.¹

ABSA is an umbrella organisation for Australian boarding schools and is recognised as the leading authority in Australia on boarding for school-aged children. It represents boarding schools and hostels providing for over 21,100 students.

AHISA is a professional association for principals of independent schools. Its members lead schools that collectively educate over 11 per cent of Australia's school children and some 20 per cent of Year 12 students. There are over 15,000 students boarding in AHISA members' schools.

That is, for many Indigenous students, boarding schools represent the sole form of secondary schooling provision available to them.

The discussion paper issued as part of the 2017 Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE)² itemised a number of developments affecting the viability of regional, rural and remote communities, including:

- The flow of young people from rural areas into urban areas
- The closure of local services such as banks, post offices and hospitals
- The mechanisation of farming and its impact on rural demographics
- The development of regional centres at the expense of small towns
- The consolidation of schooling provision, forcing the closure of many small primary schools.

It is important to recognise that boarding schools are not the cause of changes in service provision in regional and remote areas and therefore the viability of regional and remote communities, but a vital component of solutions to address the impact of these changes on the educational opportunities available in these communities.

2. Encouraging school completion

In his second reading speech to the Bill in the House of Representatives, Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts, the Hon Paul Fletcher, noted that 'data from the Department of Human Services shows that the number of Abstudy boarding students drops by approximately 60 per cent between the ages of 15 and 17'.

Independent boarding schools adopt a range of strategies to encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to remain engaged with their studies and to counter home sickness and cultural dislocation. In preparation for its submission to IRRRE³, AHISA surveyed its members on strategies adopted to help students living away from home to overcome their personal and educational challenges. While the survey related to all students from regional and remote areas, it is clear that some of the strategies mentioned relate particularly to Indigenous students:

Strategies to help students living away from home overcome personal & educational challenges (in order of number of mentions)	
MAJOR CITY BOARDING SCHOOLS	REGIONAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS
Targeted literacy and numeracy teaching/tutoring	Targeted literacy and numeracy teaching/tutoring
Visits by school staff to students' homes	Specific curricular or co-curricular offerings to appeal to boarding students
Buddy system with day students or city families	Buddy system with day students or school families
Facilities for students to Skype with parents	Visits by school staff to students' homes
Long-term relationships with Indigenous communities	Facilities for students to Skype with parents
Programs for cultural and language recognition and support	Long-term relationships with Indigenous communities
Accommodation for students' parents while visiting their child	Collection of students from their home communities at the beginning of each academic year or each term

Other strategies reported by Heads included:

- Transition programs involving students' previous teachers and schools
- An online transition program for Year 6 students entering boarding in Year 7 to support networking with other incoming boarding students and which also support academic preparation
- Cultural training for staff and student peers
- Employment of a school Boarding Liaison Officer

- Employment of a full-time Indigenous Program Coordinator
- Employment of Aboriginal education workers
- Instituting a strong Indigenous cultural program, including a dance program
- Live streaming of school events so that they can be viewed by boarding students' parents
- Inviting Indigenous elders to offer cultural programs or teach language
- Appointing Aboriginal university students to work with Aboriginal boarders after school.

Research undertaken by AHISA for its submission⁴ to the Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students, conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs in the 44th Parliament, found a number of factors contribute to the success of residential programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from regional and remote areas attending metropolitan schools, including:

- Sensitivity of school communities to the cultural backgrounds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is important in helping students develop a sense of belonging at school
- Efforts by schools to promote and celebrate Indigenous cultures and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the expression of their home cultures are important in helping students maintain their cultural identity
- Developing trust through long-term relationships between schools and remote Indigenous communities helps students transition to city boarding schools
- A higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within a school can augment students' sense of belonging
- High expectations of students as a component of the 'academic press' that has been shown to contribute to overall student achievement in independent schools is also a factor in the achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from regional and remote areas attending metropolitan boarding schools on residential scholarships
- The holistic care of students in boarding houses – where attention to the physical and emotional wellbeing of students is as important as academic studies – and the provision of safe learning environments are contributing factors to the success of scholarship programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- Establishing post-school pathways supports the long-term success of metropolitan residential programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from regional and remote areas.

The breadth of strategies adopted by schools to engage and support Indigenous students indicates that extending the eligibility of families of Abstudy students to receive the Family Tax Benefit until their children complete Year 12 cannot be expected to provide a 'one shot quick fix' to promote retention. It will, however, remove what amounts to a financial disincentive from the complex mix of pressures that influence students' decision making on whether to complete their schooling.

3. Contributing to communities

AHISA and ABSA would also like to make Committee members aware that a view of boarding schools as simply representing a 'withdrawal' from communities overlooks the role boarding schools can play in 'making a deposit' to regional and remote communities through ongoing partnership arrangements that provide educational enrichment. Examples of such 'deposits' include:

- As noted in the IRRRRE discussion paper, staffing is a persistent challenge for regional and remote schools. In its submission to the Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students, AHISA gave examples of metropolitan independent schools which had initiated teacher professional development and support programs in collaboration with primary schools in remote Indigenous communities as part of their broader relationships with the communities.

- 'Pop up' classes in science or other curriculum areas are a further way metropolitan independent schools are seeding their expertise and resources into remote communities.
- Independent schools in outer regional areas are also partnering with neighbouring schools to offer teacher professional exchange and support, student-to-student mentoring, sharing of facilities and shared sporting and cultural opportunities.

Importantly, such partnership arrangements offer opportunities for 'two way learning', helping to develop the cultural knowledge and appreciation that enables boarding schools to support their Indigenous students.

It would be a grave disservice to regional and remote communities to underestimate the role of boarding schools in helping to sustain the viability of these communities as places where families can choose to live yet still access outstanding educational opportunities for their children.

Yours faithfully,

Ms Beth Blackwood

CEO, Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia

Mr Richard Stokes

Executive Director, Australian Boarding Schools Association

NOTES

¹ Independent Schools Council of Australia (2019) Boarding schools. Accessed 8 August 2019 at <https://isca.edu.au/about-independent-schools/about-independent-schools/boarding-schools/>.

² Documents relating to the IRRRE, including the discussion paper, are available at <https://www.education.gov.au/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education>.

³ AHISA's submission to the IRRRE is available at <https://submissions.education.gov.au/Forms/IRRRE/Documents/Association-of-Heads-of-Independent-Schools-of-Australia.pdf>.

⁴ Parts 1 and 2 of AHISA's submission to the Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students is available at https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Indigenous_Affairs/Educational_Opportunities/Submissions (Submission 46).