

Submission in Relation to the Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

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Introduction

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South Wales is thankful for this opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The P&C Federation supports the position of individual educational and developmental needs met by a range of differential services expressed through appropriate and well planned curricula, programs and environments conducted by sensitive and well-trained personnel in conjunction with parents and families. It is essential that school staff, parents and the Government work in partnership to ensure that the needs of each student in the Public Education system are met.

The core belief of the P&C Federation is that the education of our youth is the most fundamental means of ensuring individual and collective success and, as a result, our greatest national resource.

P&C Federation's response to this inquiry is guided by several broad principles:

1. Free public education should be open to all people irrespective of culture, gender, academic ability and socio-economic class.
2. School models should be sufficiently broad to reflect regional, ethnic and cultural differences in the Australian community, and should not contain rigidly implemented programs.
3. The basic aim of education is to help each individual progress toward attaining their full potential, both as a person and as a member of society. It is important that the individual needs of students be addressed by the application of principles of equity, the participation and empowerment of student, parents and educators.

With this in mind, the best approaches to maximise education outcomes for indigenous students are those that recognise that indigenous needs often differ from non-indigenous needs, and that indigenous needs can vary from community to community. Approaches that are not cognisant of this are unlikely to result in indigenous students attaining their full potential in education.

Terms of Reference

Access to, participation in and outcomes of pre-schooling

It is well-established that experiences during pre-schooling ages are of immense importance to later educational outcomes, and early childhood services may therefore be imperative to breaking cycles of intergenerational disadvantage.¹ But despite being one of the most disadvantaged sectors in Australia, indigenous people are under-represented in early childhood services, with up to 43% of indigenous children aged ~3.5- 4.5 years not attending pre-school.² Key reasons for lack of attendance include barriers to access, such as high fees and transport costs, and unwelcome environments for indigenous people.³

¹ Heckman and Masterov 2007. The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children. *Review of Agricultural Economics, American Agricultural Economics Association*, vol. 29(3), pages 446-493

² Hewitt and Walter 2014. Preschool participation among Indigenous children in Australia. *Family Matters* No. 95

³ Indigenous Child Care Choices 2011. Project Report Developed for Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families

The importance of pre-school in improving indigenous education outcomes is underscored by an evaluation of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-14* (which sought to close the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous performance); the evaluation noted that the plan “*may have benefited from greater focus on pre- and post-school education, rather than focusing only on school education*”.⁴

One promising avenue to overcome barriers to access is the **Preschool Funding Model (PFM)**, under which funding for pre-school students is provided per child base rates of relative disadvantage weighted to families with pre-school age children. The NSW Department of Education has allocated \$150 million toward this, and in 2013, the Department increased loadings for Aboriginal children aged 3 years or older from \$3,300 to \$5,270.⁵ The Department has also allocated a further \$115 million to the **Start Strong** program, which from 2017 will be directed toward lowering pre-school fees in a bid to encourage children to attend 600 hours of pre-school per year. This new funding should reduce most fees for indigenous children.⁶ An issue noted in earlier research is that many indigenous families were unaware of the subsidies and services available for pre-school attendance.⁷ We therefore urge the Government to help ensure information on these benefits is widely known.

Another crucial element in improving indigenous pre-school attendance is understanding the cultural context of indigenous children and communities. A 2011 review noted that the most successful programs in early education are those with a “holistic” approach, which “*addresses children and families in the context of their communities and cultures*”.⁸ For example, early education is generally perceived by indigenous families more centred in families and communities than in non-indigenous culture, and the system of long pre-school hours is less inclusive to indigenous families. Moreover, the presence of indigenous staff at preschools and an effort to incorporate indigenous culture (such as Dreamtime stories) make preschool environments more welcoming to indigenous communities, and are known to boost indigenous participation in preschools. One point that research overwhelmingly agrees on is that “one size fits all” approaches are less successful in increasing indigenous pre-school participation than approaches which account for indigenous cultural factors.⁹ We encourage the Standing Committee to recognise the factors that demonstrably improve indigenous participation rates in pre-schools and work to apply these as widely as possible.

The provision of boarding school education and its outcomes

There is exceedingly little data indicating whether boarding schools have an overall positive or negative effect on indigenous students. Much of the evidence is anecdotal and comes from

⁴ Evaluation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-14, page 26

⁵ NSW Department of Education Media Release 24 October 2014. More funding and a new funding model for preschools - <http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au/about-us/news-at-det/media-releases1/more-funding-and-a-new-funding-model-for-preschools>

⁶ NSW Department of Education, Start Strong - <http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au/what-we-offer/regulation-and-accreditation/early-childhood-education-care/funding/start-strong>

⁷ Mann et al. 2011. Aboriginal Access to Preschool: What attracts and retains Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in preschools? *SDN Ngara Nanga*

⁸ Sims 2011. *Closing the gap - Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school*. Resource sheet no. 7 for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Page 3

⁹ Bowes and Kitson 2011. *Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families: Research Report to the NSW Department of Human Services*

submissions of experts and peak bodies to the previous inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Empirical data should be sought on matters pertaining to indigenous students and boarding schools in order to assess policies on this issue. Some relevant factors in need of investigation include the effect of prolonged physical separation from families and communities, and the drop-out rates of indigenous students.¹⁰

Access to, participation in, and benefits of different school models for indigenous students in different parts of Australia

Several factors have been associated with improved engagement and outcomes for indigenous students. For instance, a school leadership and culture that facilitates positive environments in classrooms and incorporates indigenous student identity has a beneficial impact on student performance.¹¹ Moreover, a curriculum that includes indigenous perspectives (for example, incorporating indigenous language comprehension) is known to boost engagement at schools.¹² But possibly the most important factor is family and community involvement in education; schools that establish authentic partnerships with indigenous communities, sometimes through formal agreements, consistently show the best outcomes for indigenous students.¹³

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-14* recommended several such actions to close the gap in indigenous and non-indigenous performance.¹⁴ Some targets included increasing the proportion of indigenous students involved in personalised learning and the number of schools with school-community partnership agreements in place. Other targets included bringing indigenous attendance rates at schools to the same level as non-indigenous students, and halving the gap in numeracy and literacy by 2018.

A 2014 evaluation found positive results of the Action Plan in some areas, but mixed results in others. In the important area of community engagement, the evaluation found that the focus on personalised learning and school-community partnership agreements is too inflexible and narrow, since it led to little acknowledgement of indigenous culture. It concluded that “*While a strong acknowledgment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures is critical to creating a welcoming school environment that encourages students to attend and engage, the influence of the Action Plan in explicitly promoting cultural recognition was limited*” and urged initiatives to encourage schools to develop programs for

¹⁰ Rogers and Biddle 2015. *Submission to Inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Submission 14)*; Independent Education Union Queensland and Northern Territory Branch (IEUA-QNT) 2015. *Submission to Inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Submission 10)*;

¹¹ Ockenden 2014. *Closing the Gap - Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people*. Resource sheet no. 33 produced by the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse

¹² Doyle and Hill 2008. *Our children, our future—achieving improved primary and secondary education outcomes for Indigenous students: an overview of investment opportunities and approaches*. Sydney: AMP Foundation, Effective Philanthropy & Social Ventures Australia

¹³ What Works. The Work Program 2012. *Success in remote schools: a research study of eleven improving remote schools*. Melbourne. National Curriculum Services

¹⁴ Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs 2011. *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010–2014*.

cultural development.¹⁵ It has also been noted that non-indigenous teachers can struggle to effectively engage in material for indigenous students.¹⁶

We urge the Standing Committee to recognise that challenges facing indigenous students require unique responses. Initiatives to more firmly incorporate indigenous culture into school communities should be pursued to boost the engagement of indigenous students. We also urge the Standing Committee to ensure that non-indigenous teachers are as fully trained as possible to meet the unique challenges faced by indigenous students.

The progress of other Action Plan targets such as enrolment and attendance rates is difficult to measure due to double-counting and Indigenous population projections being based on Census data collected every five years.¹⁷ We encourage the Government to seek ways to improve data-reliability regarding attendance rates and other targets, in order to effectively monitor the progress of targets.

Engagement and achievement of students in remote areas

P&C Federation believes that challenges facing schools can vary depending on geographic remoteness, but that geographic location should not form an obstacle to educational outcomes. Just as indigenous students face challenges unique from non-indigenous students, indigenous students in remote areas face distinct challenges from those in regional or metropolitan areas, and a generic response to schools regardless of geographic isolation would not be appropriate.

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-14* made little distinction between metropolitan regional and remote schools, but instead developed a largely uniform approach to schools in all areas. The 2014 evaluation of the Action Plan noted that schools in each of these areas face unique challenges but that the Action Plan formed few responses specifically targeting these challenges.

Some of the challenges facing indigenous students in remote areas include:

- lower socio-economic status
- greater vulnerability in early childhood (e.g. higher risk of behavioural or emotional problems)
- lower levels of student attendance
- poorer levels of student achievement
- higher rates of teacher turnover
- larger proportions of students with English as an additional language
- fewer economic and employment opportunities.¹⁸

P&C Federation urges the Government to ensure that the different challenges between urban, regional and remote schools is more adequately addressed. Different indigenous communities have

¹⁵ *Evaluation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-14*, page 63

¹⁶ Biddle 2010. *A human capital approach to the educational marginalisation of Indigenous Australians*. CAEPR working paper no. 67/2010. Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University

¹⁷ *Evaluation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-14*, page 46

¹⁸ *Evaluation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-14*, page 63

their own set of challenges, and approaches to indigenous education should be able to be flexibly implemented by each community rather than being uniformly prescribed.

Impacts on, and support for families and communities whose children experience different models of educational services

There is currently little available research on the impact that models of educational services have on the families and communities of students. We encourage the Government to collect empirical information on this as a matter of priority.

Comparisons of school models in the transition to further education and employment outcomes.

Much of the work to improve the enrolment and completion rates of indigenous students is still in progress, and there is therefore little direct information on which school models are most appropriate for transitioning to further education or employment. Nonetheless, it is well-established that students who complete Year 12 or an equivalent have greater employment opportunities than those who do not. It follows that pursuing the policies which are associated with improved indigenous performance, such as those referred to in this submission, would likely increase the further education and employment outcomes of indigenous students.