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SUBMISSION

Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

The Australian Parents Council (APC) represents the interests of parents with children in non-government schools and Australia's parent population more generally. These interests extend down to early childhood development and learning, and up to post-school transitions.

In 2011, APC established Parents Australia to expand its work in the delivery of practical parent programs. The objective of Parents Australia is to build the confidence and capacity of parents and families, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, to effectively support the learning experiences, general development and wellbeing of their children at home and school. Its flagship program is the *Indigenous Parent Factor: Successful Learning in the Early Years at Home and School* which has operated since 2004 across all school and early learning/care sectors.

This joint submission is directed primarily towards two terms of reference, these being the provision of boarding school education and its outcomes, and best practice models.

Our two organisations do not profess deep expertise in matters relating to Indigenous education. However, we believe it important to draw the committee's attention to aspects of our work that bear on the Inquiry and are informed by the voices of parents, schools and communities we have worked with over many years.

The Provision of Boarding School Education and its Outcomes

APC undertook exploratory research last year to examine understandings of parent/family engagement in boarding contexts, and provide the Australian Government with preliminary advice on additional educational supports boarding schools, including those with Indigenous students, might need to assist them to meet the engagement requirements of the (then draft) AS5725 Boarding Standard for Australian Schools and Residences.¹ Eleven secondary schools in the non-government sector participated in the research, ten of which had Indigenous enrolments.

The AS5725 Standard affirms that a multi-dimensional partnership approach contributes to the quality and accountability of boarding service provision and identifies four areas for partnership work with parents and families:

- Proactive and appropriate communication with parents about individual boarders' care and support needs, progress and achievement, personal strengths and contributions;
- Regular collection and use of information about family needs and expectations to help improve service delivery;
- Regular assessment of parent satisfaction; and
- Facilitation of regular communication between all parties, including academic teaching staff and residential boarding staff.

¹ http://austparents.edu.au/2015/wp-content/uploads/APC_FINAL-REPORT_Parent-and-Family-Engagement-in-Boarding-Contexts_JUNE-2015.pdf

In relation to the positive engagement of Indigenous parents and families in boarding and schooling, APC's research pointed to the importance of:

- Having dedicated staff resources to support partnership building with Indigenous parents, families and communities;
- Having well-constructed and somewhat tailored induction/orientation programs for Indigenous parents, and finding the means to enable them or significant family members to participate in these and in milestone education events such as Year 12 graduation;
- Community outreach visits to connect with families, connect families to their students' academic progress and development, and build network capability; and
- Encompassing family and community in relationship building and partnership activity.

Published in June 2015, the report *Parent and Family Engagement in Boarding School Contexts* made a number of recommendations in relation to Indigenous students:

- That, having not been reviewed since 1998, the ABSTUDY scheme be comprehensively reviewed and with consideration of the engagement benefit of financially supporting parents to attend schools for annual inductions that incorporate the engagement principles of academic socialisation and parent role construction and the celebration of significant milestone graduations in Years 10-12, and current arrangements for student suspensions, expulsions and medical expenses.
- That not having done so since 2011, the Australian Government issue updated ABSTUDY information directly to boarding service providers and, further to this, develop a plain language publication for parents.
- That the Australian Government consider the circumstances in which it might provide funding to support boarding schools with high, remote Indigenous student populations to make community visits to engage Indigenous parents and communities in schooling.
- That the Section 5 (engagement) requirements of the AS5725 Boarding Standard for Australian Schools and Residences be investigated in residential (e.g. Aboriginal Hostels Limited) contexts.

Other recommendations with broader application included:

- That parent/family engagement professional development modules be developed for boarding and teaching staff to enhance theoretical and practical understanding of parent/family engagement and partnerships, and explore application to boarding environments.
- That resources be developed to inform and support boarding parents including in relation to being confident parents/carers, transitioning children to boarding, the management of student and family anxiety, and family engagement in schooling and student learning from a distance.

APC particularly appreciates that through the current Inquiry, there is now a groundswell of support for a review of the ABSTUDY scheme.

Partnerships with Indigenous Parents to Support Student Learning

APC would also like to draw the Inquiry's attention to case study research commissioned by the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau which analysed innovative and effective partnerships between schools and Indigenous, most particularly Aboriginal, families and communities.²

² The Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau is a joint initiative of, and is co-governed by, the Australian Parents Council and the Australian Council of State School Organisations.

The report *Parents as Partners in Indigenous Children's Learning* (Muller, 2012) references the substantial evidence base which shows that particular forms of parent engagement have positive and significant effects on academic achievement and other outcomes (e.g. literacy acquisition, school readiness, school attendance, student motivation, retention and graduation).³ It furthermore notes the effectiveness of partnership approaches in encouraging and supporting the engagement of Indigenous and other parents/carers in children's learning. In this context, Muller observes:

If partnerships between families, schools and communities are to be developed successfully, however, parental engagement in the education of their children is essential. Broadly defined, parental engagement involves partnerships between families, schools and communities, raising parental awareness about the benefits of becoming engaged in their children's education, and providing them with the skills to do so (Muller, 2009). So the relationship between partnerships is symbiotic: engagement is necessary for partnerships to work, and partnerships are the best way to get parents engaged (p. 63).

The report identifies a range of factors that influence the commitment and success of schools in reaching out and forming active and effective partnerships with Indigenous parents, families and communities to support student learning.

Key amongst these is the extent of the school principal's personal commitment to the partnership ideal, and the quality of their leadership. Other factors considered to contribute in positive ways are:

- Pro-active personal and positive contact with families;
- Community outreach by schools;
- Making teachers responsible for relationships;
- Meeting parents' needs at many levels and being an agent of parental self-growth;
- Employing personnel dedicated to Indigenous partnership-building;
- Preparedness to devote resources to partnership building;
- A commitment to building social capital.

APC notes that although parent engagement has been recognised as a core feature of high quality-high equity schooling systems (Australia & Gonski, 2011), and now features in the Australian Government's policy platform, its potential to improve Indigenous student outcomes remains untapped.⁴ A national engagement policy or strategy would be beneficial.

Best Practice Parent Engagement: The Indigenous Parent Factor Program

The *Indigenous Parent Factor (IPF): Successful Learning in the Early Years at Home and School* was developed in collaboration with Indigenous communities, Elders and educators to facilitate parent engagement and home-school partnerships in support of Indigenous children's successful learning and literacy development, entry into school and participation in school life. Targeting Indigenous parents and carers with children aged 0 – 8, the program's objectives are to:

1. Increase and improve understanding among Indigenous parents of the ways their children learn, especially in the early years.
2. Increase the knowledge among Indigenous parents and carers about how young children learn to read and write.

³ <https://austparents.edu.au/2014/wp-content/uploads/parents-as-partners-in-indigenous-childrens-learning.pdf>

⁴ <https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/review-of-funding-for-schooling-final-report-dec-2011.pdf>

3. Persuade Indigenous parents and carers of the importance of school and pre-school attendance by their children.
4. Develop partnerships between Indigenous parents and schools.
5. Develop further understanding among Indigenous parents of how much their children gain when parents are involved in their education.
6. Encourage in Indigenous parents the realisation that their own confidence will benefit from their being involved in their children's education.
7. Establish a pattern of adult learning in Indigenous communities.

The core IPF program comprises three workshops (early learning, learning to read, learning to write) which can be completed separately or as a cluster, with a train-the-trainer component incorporated on request to support participants to become program presenters. In 2013, a mathematics workshop was added to the IPF series.

Participant feedback across time consistently confirms the IPF program is unique in the way it operates. The program has twice been independently evaluated and is now supported by an evaluation framework designed by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY).

Developed well before the evidence on parent engagement and what works to promote it was evaluated by Australian researchers Emerson, Fear, Fox and Sanders (2012),⁵ their findings confirm the positioning of the IPF program as best practice: 'There is clear evidence that interventions designed to enhance student outcomes through positive parental engagement have the greatest impact when:

- They are focused on linking the behaviours of families, teachers and students to learning outcomes;
- There is a clear understanding of the roles of parents and teachers in learning;
- Family behaviours are conducive to learning, and
- There are consistent, positive relations between the school and parents.'⁶

The program is disarming in its simplicity, but this should not be mistaken for insubstantiality. The issues facing Indigenous parents and carers in the education of their children are deep-seated, complex and multi-faceted. The program has demonstrated its capacity not only to engage Indigenous people in the education of their children but also to build self-esteem, raise skills, open pathways to renewed education by parents, and in some cases lead directly to employment. It does so because it connects with Indigenous parents and carers at points of common understanding, persuades them of its relevance and potential to benefit them and their children, and does so with respectfulness and cultural sensitivity (Denis Muller & Associates, 2007).

Ms Caz Bosch MAPS
Chair
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⁵ Emerson, C., Fear, J. Fox, S. & Fear, J. (2012). Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from research. A report prepared by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau.

⁶ Emerson, C., Fox, S. & Fear, J. (2012). Options to Promote Parental Engagement in School Education: A Preliminary Systems Analysis. Unpublished internal working paper prepared by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau.