Independent Schools Working to Close the Gap on Education

The Independent Schools Council of Australia welcomes the strong focus on education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the Closing the Gap Prime Minister’s Report 2016, particularly in regard to students in remote and very remote areas.

ISCA Executive Director Colette Colman today said that “the Independent school sector makes an important contribution to the national effort to close the gap, and values its partnership with government in delivering educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. However, while the report highlights a few encouraging figures in the education goals there is still much work to be done.”

Ms Colman said that, “Government funding needs to acknowledge the special needs of Indigenous students, particularly those from remote and very remote areas where often Independent schools are the sole education option. It is vital schools in these areas be adequately supported in their strategies to lift attendance, literacy, numeracy and year 12 completion rates. Funding models need to continue to acknowledge the unique circumstances of schools serving large numbers of Indigenous students and their often fluctuating student numbers.”

The Independent school sector is Australia’s major provider of boarding schools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with over 2,000 Indigenous students attending 113 boarding schools. Many of these students come from remote communities where there are no local secondary schools available and living away from their community is the only option. These students experience a range of educational disadvantages, many coming into school with low levels of literacy and numeracy, as well as health and social issues that need to be addressed in the school environment.

“Boarding schools catering to significant numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are under a great deal of financial pressure” said Ms Colman. “Parents of these children generally do not have the capacity to pay fees and so the schools rely almost exclusively on government support to deliver their educational services. However, government support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students through the ABSTUDY scheme falls short of covering the reasonable costs of meeting the accommodation and day-to-day needs of Indigenous boarding students.”

Independent schools provide education to over 12,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. While national Indigenous full time enrolments increased by 4.1% over the 2014-2015 period, the Independent sector recorded the strongest growth of any sector at 7.5%. A number of Independent schools have 100% Indigenous enrolments, and a total of 39 Independent schools have a majority of Indigenous students enrolled.

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