
Extension of Indigenous Boarding Providers Program welcomed

Catholic Education welcomes the Australian Government's announcement of an extension of the Indigenous Boarding Providers Grants Program. However, a more comprehensive and long-term solution is needed to support educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

National Catholic Education executive director Jacinta Collins said the extension of the program for a further two years provides a little more funding certainty, while the government considers the Indigenous Boarding Design Review and develops a more comprehensive response.

"I recently visited Mount St Bernard College, Herberton in Far North Queensland which has 90 of its 114 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students boarding at the college," Ms Collins said.

"Schools like Mount St Bernard College are struggling to make boarding a viable option because recurrent funding through the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) doesn't cover the needs of boarding students for living, health and pastoral care, cultural and social development, or other needs.

"For many of these school communities the capacity for families to contribute to school and other costs is extremely limited, creating a funding shortfall for educational and capital needs.

"This is one area where non-government schools provide critical support to disadvantaged students outside of the SRS as for many students, this is really their only secondary school option.

Additionally, administration for ABSTUDY requirements, that is available to support boarding expenses, is often onerous or may not be successful.

"While this short-term extension offers much-needed funding, there is the need for an ongoing, long-term solution to address these critical issues."

Ms Collins said schools in remote regions face significant challenges around disadvantage, attendance, wellbeing and other factors that impact greatly on student learning outcomes.

"The resourcing of viable boarding options, while maintaining close connections to their communities, will support educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities."

Nationally in 2023, 46 of the 52 Catholic boarding schools had Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students. Of these, nine schools had more than 80 per cent of their boarding students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, totalling 542 enrolments. In total, there were 1,322 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students, which is 4.4 per cent of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in Catholic schools.

There are 1,756 Catholic schools educating 800,000 or one in five Australian students and employing 109,000 staff.