

26 June 2020

Chair  
Standing Committee on Employment  
Education and Training  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: [ee.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:ee.reps@aph.gov.au)

**Dear Committee,**

**Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training Inquiry – Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on home learning and teaching**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide submissions to this inquiry in relation to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on home learning and teaching. We note that the Committee seeks information about the adaptations and solutions adopted by schools in response to the COVID pandemic with a view to assisting its inquiry into the education of students in remote and complex environments.

**About Catholic Education**

The NCEC is the representative body of Australia's Catholic schools. Working closely with State and Territory Catholic education commissions, the NCEC advocates at the national level on behalf of the Catholic sector and the hundreds of thousands of Australian families who entrust the education of their children to our schools.

Catholic schools are the nation's largest provider of education outside government. Australia's 1,751 mostly low-fee Catholic schools educate one in five, or 768,000 students and employ more than 98,000 Australians, making Catholic education a key partner in the delivery of quality schooling with the government and independent sectors. 40 percent of Catholic schools are located in regional Australia. As noted in our submission dated 5 March 2020, our schools educate about 9,400 students in remote and very remote areas. Predominantly these students identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

**The response of Catholic education to the COVID-19 pandemic**

Catholic Education acknowledges the extraordinary efforts of our school communities in their response to the pandemic. Our teachers and other school staff have gone to new lengths to continue to deliver a quality education for students during the pandemic.

Catholic schools have adapted well to the remote delivery of curriculum during the period of learning from home. Every school adapted to the unique needs of their students and their home context. This was true for all year levels of learning, from kindergarten children through to senior secondary. Some

schools delivered the curriculum through online platforms such as zoom, Microsoft teams and/or story park. Other schools, responding to the different needs of students and families, including limited access to resources and reliable internet connectivity, delivered the curriculum through the provision of paper-based materials such as study packs. Some schools were able to support students through the provision of electronic devices such as laptops. Many students in remote communities have poor internet connectivity and a lack of devices.

A key aspect of learning from home for our schools was the continuation of pastoral care and wellbeing support for students. This was facilitated through virtual assemblies, “home room” check ins and individual weekly themes to keep students engaged with their school community. Our boarding schools and their staff were diligent in supporting their students, particularly those from remote communities where a loss of engagement with learning can become permanent. If a student returning to their community had a remote school nearby, some schools established a connection with the remote school and arranged for returning students to access support such as assistance with computer equipment and internet connectivity.

Many of our schools have reported positives with the establishment of new remote learning practices. Some approaches may well continue as they have led to improved efficiencies and more positive student and parent feedback. These include online parent-teacher interviews, a greater understanding about individual student’s home learning environments enabling more targeted teaching, and improved collaboration amongst teaching staff across the sectors.

Catholic schools were keen to welcome students back for face to face learning. The requirement to switch to remote learning for parts of term 1 and 2 has affected the education of some students. While there is presently insufficient detail to understand the full ramifications of the remote learning experiment, observable patterns are emerging, and it is becoming clear that students who were already experiencing disadvantage pre-COVID will suffer the worst.

The inherent limitations of remote educational delivery mean that some students have fallen behind. These limitations have been felt most acutely by students who lack the means to fully engage with remote learning because of reliable high-speed internet connection and access to essential electronic devices like smartphones, laptops and tablet computers. Students whose families experience economic disadvantage are overrepresented in this cohort.

### **Boarding schools**

Catholic boarding schools have been hit particularly hard by the pandemic. Increasingly, our boarding schools are a chosen pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote areas to obtain an education.

Most Catholic boarding schools are in regional Australia and are low fee. They provide both an education and a home to students. Of the 16 Catholic boarding schools in Queensland, 13 are in regional areas. To ensure boarding remains affordable for families, boarding fees charged are often lower than the cost of providing boarding services, meaning boarding operations often run at a deficit.

Students from regional and remote Australia also make up a significant proportion of the student population at Catholic boarding schools located in capital cities.

COVID-19 restrictions required many Catholic boarding schools to close early for boarding students towards the end of term 1. The complications of the COVID-19 pandemic created challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote areas to travel to and from boarding schools. Catholic education acknowledges the generous support from the Commonwealth through modifications to ABSTUDY to assist students to overcome these challenges and continue their education without disruption.

Catholic education has complied with the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) statement on boarding students and has welcomed the return of a greater number of students to boarding schools in term 2. However, some students have been unable to return to boarding schools and where this is the case, learning from home programs have continued. This disruption to boarding schools has had a significant financial impact on boarding income. Many of our boarding schools have lost much, if not all of their boarding income for term 2 and even with prudent financial management, there is little capacity to absorb the once-in-a-century shock of COVID-19 within the lean budgets of Catholic boarding schools.

Catholic education has raised this issue with the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 (unpublished submission dated 5 June 2020) and seeks also to bring this to the attention of this Committee. Catholic education is proud of the contribution our boarding schools make to education particularly for our remote students. We look forward to the continuing support of governments.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present these issues to the Committee. Please do not hesitate to contact Catholic education if you seek any further information.

Yours faithfully,



Jacinta Collins  
Executive Director  
National Catholic Education Commission