

20 December 2019

The Hon Josh Frydenburg MP
Treasurer
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2601
LODGED ONLINE

Dear Treasurer,

2020-21 Pre-budget submission
National Catholic Education Commission

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) is pleased to present our priorities to the Australian Government for the 2020-2021 Federal Budget.

The NCEC is the national representative body of Australia's Catholic schools. Working closely with the state and territory Catholic Education Commissions, the NCEC advocates for and develops policy at the national level for Australia's Catholic schools.

The NCEC acknowledges the support of successive governments of Australia's Catholic schools which educate 20% of Australia's children.

There are three key challenges that the NCEC believes the Australian Government should prioritise in this Federal Budget:

- The capital demands of Australia's increasing school aged population on Australia's Catholic schools.
- The need for recurrent and capital investment to improve access to early learning opportunities in Australia's Catholic schools.
- Ensuring sufficient funding for indigenous boarding schools particularly in the Northern Territory and Queensland.

Recommendations

1. To meet the future capital needs of Australia's Catholic schools due to increases in the Australian school-aged population, the NCEC believes the Australian Government should increase the capital funding amount allocated to non-government schools under the *Australian Education Act 2013*.
2. Given population projections and increased enrolments in growth areas for Australia's Catholic schools, the NCEC believes it is appropriate for the Australian Government to reconsider how capital works are supported in non-government schools by reviewing the capital funding provisions of the *Australian Education Act 2013*.
3. The NCEC recommends the Australian Government allocate a pool of funds to support the capital costs associated with the construction and maintenance of teacher housing in rural and remote Catholic schools across Australia.
4. The NCEC believes the Australian Government should implement the recommendations of *Lifting*

our game: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions particularly with respect to funding universal early childhood education in the two years preceding foundation year.

5. The NCEC recommends the Australian Government allocate a pool of funds to support the capital costs associated with the establishment and maintenance of early childhood education facilities on existing Catholic school sites.
6. The NCEC recommends the Australian Government ensure that Catholic schools can continue to operate Indigenous boarding schools in the Northern Territory and Queensland.

Capital needs

Australia's education sector is based on a mix of public, independent and low fee Catholic schools. This public/private mix:

- ensures maximum accessibility and quality;
- enables parent choice; and
- alleviates pressure on government education budgets.

The expectation of the community and governments is that this will continue.

In line with general population increases, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has estimated that the number of school-aged children will increase significantly over coming years.

In making enrolment projections, Australia's Catholic schools are factoring in population growth. While increased demand for enrolment most likely will be concentrated in the growth corridors of capital cities and large regional centres (where planning for new schools and repurposing existing facilities is underway), all our schools will require capital investment.

Capital funding is a critical issue for Australia's Catholic schools.

Currently Australia's Catholic schools are faced with three competing capital funding demands:

1. Maintaining existing school infrastructure to support evolving curriculum needs.
2. Ensuring that capital infrastructure is up-to-date with the needs of a 21st century education system.
3. Meeting school provision demands in growth corridors in capital cities and growing rural and regional areas.

Parents and families of students at Catholic schools have always contributed the vast bulk of capital expenditure on Australia's Catholic schools. In 2017, parents and families at Catholic schools contributed almost 90% of the capital expenditure in Australia's Catholic schools. This equated to \$1.137 billion. This expenditure benefits individual schools, the communities they serve and, as acknowledged by government, alleviates pressure on federal, state and territory education budgets. This means real savings for the whole community.

The federal government provides funding to non-government schools for capital works under the *Australian Education Act 2013* ('the Act') through the responsible block grant authority (the BGA). In circumstances where the demand for enrolments in Catholic schools will grow, particularly in growth

areas, there is a need to reconsider how the federal government supports capital works in Catholic schools. The Commonwealth Capital Grants Program is the only ongoing federal program that supports Catholic schools. It is declining in value against the cost of maintaining and building new school infrastructure and is insufficient to meet the demands on school enrolments from Australia's increased population.

Given the increased need for school places, parents and families at Catholic schools will be placed under significant pressure to increase their contributions to the increasing cost of capital works and/or self-fund new school infrastructure. This pressure will be particularly felt in low socio-economic (SES) areas.

Students at Catholic schools and their parents and families are entitled to support. The NCEC proposes that in this federal budget, the Australian Government not only increase the pool of funds available under the Act for capital but also review the capital funding program.

- 1. To meet the future capital needs of Australia's Catholic schools due to increases in the school-aged population, the NCEC believes the Australian Government should increase the capital funding amount allocated to non-government schools under the *Australian Education Act 2013*.**
- 2. Given population projections and increased enrolments for Australia's Catholic schools, the NCEC believes it is appropriate for the Australian Government to reconsider how capital works are supported in non-government schools by reviewing the capital funding provisions of the *Australian Education Act 2013*.**

Capital challenges in rural and remote schools

Australian Catholic schools are proud of their tradition of providing schools in rural and remote Australian communities. More than 40 per cent of Australia's Catholic schools are located outside major metropolitan areas and in many remote Indigenous communities, a Catholic school is the only local school. The ability of small low SES rural and remote schools to raise capital funds from the parents and families at these schools is limited.

Ensuring that sufficient funds are available to staff, maintain and upgrade Catholic schools in rural and remote locations is a constant challenge. Attracting teachers to such schools also presents difficulties. As identified in the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, the ability to offer teachers access to affordable, secure housing encourages teachers and their families to take on roles in these communities ensuring that all children, no matter their address, have the opportunity to receive a quality education. The availability of additional funds to build and maintain quality teacher housing would ensure that Catholic schools can continue to offer teachers in rural and remote communities access to suitable accommodation.

- 3. The NCEC recommends the Australian Government allocate a pool of funds to support the capital costs associated with the construction and maintenance of teacher housing in rural and remote Catholic schools across Australia.**

Early childhood education

Catholic schools operate pre-schools and kindergartens (early learning facilities) in all states and territories. Typically, these facilities are located on Catholic school sites to offer children the opportunity to participate in the life of the Catholic school community. Given our existing school network and school infrastructure, it makes economic sense for Australia's Catholic schools to continue to provide access to early learning opportunities. School based early childhood education (ECE) facilities deliver economic efficiencies (shared infrastructure and facilities reduce operating costs), offer children and their families the opportunity to participate in the life of a Catholic school community, enable smoother transition to primary school and facilitate increased knowledge exchange between educators.

In early 2018 the NCEC welcomed the publication of *Lifting our game: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions* ('the report'). The report was commissioned to complement the Commonwealth Government's Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools. It recommended a number of key reforms, including providing adequate funding for universal access in the year before school and the progressive implementation of universal access to a quality early education program, for example pre-school, for all three-year-old children.

The Catholic education sector acknowledges the commitment by Australian Governments of funds through the Universal Access National Partnership arrangements (UANP) to support ECE. However, we are concerned that the Government has not committed funding beyond 2020.

To improve access to early childhood education in the years before school, Australia's Catholic schools seek to incorporate more early learning facilities on school sites. Our sector has identified school sites around Australia that could accommodate such facilities. While acknowledging the ongoing independent review by the Nous Group of the UANP, the NCEC calls on the Government to do more to acknowledge the importance of universal access to ECE for all children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and support this as a priority in this year's budget.

- 4. The NCEC believes the Australian Government should implement the recommendations of *Lifting our game: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions* particularly with respect to funding universal early childhood education in the two years preceding foundation year.**
- 5. The NCEC recommends the Australian Government allocate a pool of funds to support the capital costs associated with the establishment and maintenance of early childhood education facilities on existing Catholic school sites.**

Indigenous boarding schools

Australia's Catholic schools are diverse and universal in their reach, offering an education to all. The contribution that Catholic schools make to the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is an important component of our mission. In 2018, there were over 23,000 ATSI students

enrolled in Australia's Catholic schools. In many remote Indigenous communities, a Catholic school is the only local school and there are significant benefits in ensuring that Indigenous children are educated in community or in boarding schools located nearby.

Many Catholic systemic boarding schools which educate high numbers of ATSI students, particularly those in the Northern Territory and North Queensland, experience significant challenges. One specific challenge is covering the full cost of providing an education to an individual ATSI student. Costs in our ATSI boarding schools include not only "in class costs" and other incidentals such as school equipment and excursions but also the cost of accommodation and 24-hour supervision. In addition, our schools tell us that many individual ATSI boarding students arrive at school without adequate equipment for the boarding school setting. In many cases, our schools are required to fund and provide the basic requirements of living away from home for these students. In addition, recent changes to ABSTUDY are impacting the operation of our schools and their ability to continue to educate indigenous students.

6. The NCEC recommends the Australian Government ensure that Catholic boarding schools can continue to operate indigenous boarding schools in the Northern Territory and Queensland.

Please contact me should you wish to discuss this letter and the NCEC recommendations

Yours faithfully,



Jacinta Collins
Executive Director
National Catholic Education Commission