

29 March 2018

The Hon Malcolm Turnbull MP  
Prime Minister of Australia and Chair, Council of Australian Governments  
PO Box 6022  
House of Representatives, Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

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Dear Prime Minister,

### Closing the Gap Refresh

The Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to COAG's review of Closing the Gap targets and their measurement.

The Closing the Gap *Next Phase* discussion paper highlights the importance of a strengths-based approach to identifying and bridging the wellbeing and opportunity gaps for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, allied to a recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures 'are integral for thriving communities' (page 4).

The importance of a strengths-based approach to Indigenous issues was also stressed by the Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council at its meeting on 15-16 August 2017.

In this submission we support a strengths-based approach to school education for Indigenous students by presenting evidence from innovative education partnerships between independent schools and Indigenous communities. This evidence also underlines the importance of culture and identity to the achievement and wellbeing of Indigenous students.

Flowing from the experience of our members and their schools, we then recommend that Australian governments adopt a new measure of cultural recognition among Close the Gap targets, to demonstrate not only the importance of Indigenous cultures to the wellbeing of Australia's first peoples but our willingness as a nation to embrace 'two way learning' and thereby foster our future national wellbeing.

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Yours faithfully,

**Dr Mark Merry**

AHISA National Chair  
Principal of Yarra Valley Grammar, Victoria

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## KEY POINTS & RECOMMENDATION

AHISA supports adoption of a strengths-based approach to increasing the opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to experience greater health, wellbeing and prosperity.

In school education, these opportunities will depend on the opportunity for Indigenous peoples to exercise choice in the education of their children, and to influence the shape and delivery of that education.

To support choice, important options in schooling are:

- Out of country opportunities for Indigenous children to attend boarding schools in regional and metropolitan areas, and
- Collaborative partnerships between Indigenous communities and independent schools to establish on country provision.

### Recommendation

Given the importance of culture and identity to the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples, and the importance of what this submission calls 'two way learning' in the provision of school education to Indigenous Australians, AHISA recommends creating an additional Close the Gap target to track national recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

In terms of school education, indicators could include:

- The status of Indigenous language learning as a subject, measured by offerings and student participation
- Student attitudes to Indigenous cultures as measured by the National Assessment Program for Civics and Citizenship.

(Further detail on this recommendation appears on pages 9 and 10 of this submission.)

## ABOUT AHISA

AHISA Ltd is a professional association for Heads of independent schools.

The primary object of AHISA is to optimise the opportunity for the education and welfare of Australia's young people through the maintenance of collegiality and high standards of professional practice and conduct amongst its members.

AHISA's 430 members lead schools that collectively account for over 430,000 students, representing 11.5 per cent of total Australian school enrolments and 20 per cent of Australia's total Year 12 enrolments. One in every five Australian Year 12 students gains part of their education at an AHISA member's school.

AHISA's members lead a collective workforce of over 40,000 teaching staff and some 25,000 support staff.

The socio-economic profile of AHISA members' schools is diverse. Over 20 per cent of our members lead schools serving low- to very low-SES communities.

AHISA believes that a high quality schooling system in Australia depends on:

- Parents having the freedom to exercise their rights and responsibilities in regard to the education of their children
- Students and their families having the freedom to choose among diverse schooling options
- Schools having the autonomy to exercise educational leadership as they respond to the emerging needs of their communities in a rapidly changing society.

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## TAKING A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH TO EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

### Defining a strengths-based approach

In an address delivered in 2010, Mr Mick Gooda, then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, defined a strengths-based approach as ‘about finding ways in which individuals, family units and communities can build on their capabilities’.<sup>1</sup>

With specific reference to education, a strengths-based approach has been defined as one which ‘recognises the resilience of individuals’:

It focuses on abilities, knowledge and capacities rather than on what people do not know or cannot do. It recognises that the community is a rich source of resources; assumes that people are able to learn, grow, and change; encourages positive expectations of children as learners; and is characterised by collaborative relationships. [It] assumes that children are already learners. It focuses on those attributes and resources that may enable adaptive functioning and positive outcomes. It views Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children as ‘able, capable and having agency’ rather than as ‘victims’ or as being helpless.<sup>2</sup>

In the work just cited, the authors further list a number of factors that would flow from application of a strengths-based approach in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s transition to formal learning. These include:

- Recognising and valuing the presence of the protective factors which contribute to building resilient young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (that is, shared activities, family support, strong cultural identity, health, positive self-identity)
- Supporting teachers in gaining a better understanding of the cultural knowledge their students bring to school
- Acknowledging and honouring cultural identity and diversity and incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoints into the curriculum
- Recognising the skills and expertise that exist in the community to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and making the school culturally safe and welcoming for parents and carers and community members
- Developing resources and activities that reinforce the knowledge and understandings and skills that already exist in children
- Having high expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- Acknowledging and embracing Aboriginal leadership in schools and school communities
- Being prepared to use innovative and dynamic school and staffing models in complex social and cultural contexts.

Evidence from the experience of education provision among AHISA members’ schools supports the importance of a strengths-based approach as described above for successful outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at all levels of schooling.

## Success factors for Indigenous students

In its two-part submission to the 2015-17 Parliamentary Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students, *Never Give Up*<sup>3</sup>, AHISA described strategies adopted by major metropolitan independent schools to support their Indigenous students from regional and remote areas and innovative partnerships between independent schools and Indigenous communities for educational provision both on country and out of country.

In Part 1 of AHISA's submission, key learnings drawn from a range of programs in AHISA members' schools identified a number of success factors for metropolitan residential programs for Indigenous students from rural and remote areas, including:

- Sensitivity of school communities to the cultural backgrounds of Indigenous students is important in helping students develop a sense of belonging at school
- Efforts by schools to promote and celebrate Indigenous cultures and support Indigenous students in the expression of their home cultures are important in helping students maintain their cultural identity
- Developing trust through long-term relationships between schools and remote communities helps students transition to city boarding schools
- A higher proportion of Indigenous students within a school can augment students' sense of belonging
- The commitment of school leaders underwrites program innovation and success
- The school's ethos and values inform the development and implementation of strategies to support Indigenous students socially and academically
- High expectations of students as a component of the 'academic press' that has been shown to contribute to overall student achievement in independent schools is also a factor in the achievement of Indigenous students on residential scholarships in high-achieving schools; however, high expectations must be matched with the support and resources for students to meet those expectations
- The holistic care of students in boarding houses – where attention to the physical and emotional wellbeing of students is as important as academic studies – and the provision of safe learning environments are contributing factors to the success of Indigenous scholarship programs
- Establishing post-school pathways supports the long-term success of metropolitan residential programs for regional and remote Indigenous students.

Examples of practices that illustrate the above points include:

- Demonstrating that Indigenous perspectives are valued and reinforcing Indigenous culture and identity through actions such as flying the Aboriginal flag alongside the Australian flag, including a welcome to country at major school gatherings and events, incorporation of ATSI perspectives in all curriculum areas from Prep to senior secondary, and provision of appropriate resources to teachers
- Establishment of a 'Koori club' for students

- Home-school liaison through a single member of staff
- Building relationships of trust and respect with Indigenous communities through regular visits by school leaders, sustained over time
- Student exchange visits or internet exchanges (which may include online academic work) before students enter the school
- Appointment of an Indigenous Program Coordinator whose focus is not only on the pastoral care of Indigenous students but who is also responsible for delivering a whole-of-school curriculum covering key components of Indigenous culture and history
- Schools' engagement with Indigenous communities may entail visits by students to those communities
- Establishment of partnerships with universities and vocational training providers to ease the transition of students to tertiary studies. For some schools, this may entail appointment of a post-school pathways coordinator.

Key points from Part 2 of AHISA's submission include:

- There is no one-size-fits-all solution to increase educational opportunities in remote Indigenous communities: partnerships between city schools and remote schools and communities require flexibility and the freedom to generate collaborations that are the most beneficial and which reflect the needs and capacities of those involved
- Educational programs for Indigenous students, delivered on country or in metropolitan schools, must be culturally appropriate
- Valuing the language of Indigenous students is an important part of having a culturally strong school
- On country provision supports student retention
- Residential secondary schooling provision in major metropolitan cities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities is desired by many Indigenous families for their children
- Professional assistance for teachers in remote community schools provided by city-based teachers can reduce professional isolation and improve practice
- Digital technologies are important in assisting continuity of teacher professional exchange between city/regional and remote schools, and for building relationships between children and between staff in geographically distant communities
- Positive outcomes depend on relationships between independent school communities and Indigenous communities that are built on trust and respect
- Trust can only be built over time and requires taking account of the views of Aboriginal people in the development of educational programs for their children
- Initial and ongoing liaison with Indigenous community and parent groups is essential to lay the foundations of home-school partnerships and preserve the integrity of the cultural environment of schools serving Indigenous students

- The willingness of those in the community-school partnership to make long-term commitments underwrites the success of innovative ventures in Indigenous education
- Education cannot be separated from social, health and housing issues; leaders of independent schools for Indigenous students must be prepared to work with families, not just students, especially to address the issue of regular school attendance
- Indigenous communities appreciate working with independent schools because of the opportunity it gives them to influence the shape and delivery of the education program, including the cultural environment of education provision.

Part 2 of the submission describes five innovative models initiated by AHISA members' schools which demonstrate how the above points apply within each model.

In the report of the Remote Education Systems project<sup>4</sup> it is noted that, for Indigenous people in remote communities who were surveyed as a part of project, education is primarily about language, land and culture, followed by identity and belonging. It is also about 'being strong in both worlds' and, fourthly, employment and economic participation. Non-remote Indigenous people surveyed reported education as primarily about identity, followed by employment and economic participation, then choice and opportunity, then language, land and culture.

The partnerships developed by AHISA members' schools with Indigenous communities show that it is possible to deliver education in a way that meets all these aspirations.

Of particular note is that the examples provided in AHISA's submission indicate that:

- Between-school and school-community collaborations are a viable option for increasing educational opportunities for Indigenous students
- Partnerships with governments and their agencies, other institutions and organisations support program implementation and success
- Current funding models for non-government schools must become more flexible to ensure support for innovative on country educational provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

### Culture and 'two-way learning'

School leaders who provided information for AHISA's submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry all stressed the importance of 'two-way learning', in which school communities grow and change because of their relationship with Indigenous communities and through the support offered to Indigenous students to help them maintain their cultural identity. The following comments by school leaders help describe this process<sup>5</sup>:

*We have found through our relationships with Indigenous communities, and especially in the teacher and primary-aged student visitation program that is part of our relationship with Wugularr, that we are moving beyond an awareness of 'the other', to an understanding of 'us'. The children learn alongside each other in the classroom or on camp; our teachers teach together. We change and grow through sharing. – Jonathan Walter, Principal, Woodleigh School, Mornington Peninsula, Victoria*

*Leaders must have a strongly empathetic response to cultural differences. They need patience but, even more, a capacity to listen and to suspend their own presumptions about how things should be. They need to think through, for example, how they acknowledge country in their school, and even the questions on application forms. Many of our Indigenous children have a view of kinship that does not square with enrolment forms listing one parent. Is it the Aboriginal people who need to change, or us? . . . One of the big challenges – and opportunities – we face is how we understand the world through the eyes of another.’ – Phillip Heath, Head of Barker College, Hornsby, NSW and Darkinjung Barker College, Wyong, NSW*

*Understanding the cultural divide and really being sensitive to that is the first challenge for leaders to accept. – Rick Tudor OAM, former Headmaster of Trinity Grammar School, Kew, Victoria and a Director of Melbourne Indigenous Transition School, Richmond, Victoria*

*Cultural chauvinism is certainly not attractive to Indigenous people, as they have seen so much of it in the past. – Dr John Collier, Head of St Andrew’s Cathedral College and Gawura School, Sydney, NSW*

*If a city school accepts even one Aboriginal child from a regional, rural or remote community, then the school will need to change. – Phillip Heath, Head of Barker College, Hornsby, NSW and Darkinjung Barker College, Wyong, NSW*

*If the educational provider doesn’t change, then it’s not working two-ways. – Dr Helen Drennen, Principal of Wesley College, Melbourne, Victoria and Yiramalay/Wesley Studio School, King Leopold Ranges, WA*

Respect for culture and relational trust underpin two-way learning which in turn supports a cross-cultural model of education provision. This should not be confused with cultural exchange, where one can ‘visit’ another culture but not be changed by it.

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## CLOSING THE GAP IN CULTURAL RECOGNITION

### A new target for all Australians

The importance of culture to meaningful and successful outcomes for Indigenous peoples is highlighted in the *Next Phase* discussion paper and, as noted above, cultural sensitivity is vital in education provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. AHISA therefore recommends that consideration be given to including a set of indicators of national recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture as an additional measure of how Australia as a nation is tracking in 'two-way learning'.

The status of Indigenous languages could be one such indicator. In terms of school education, measures could include:

- The number of Indigenous languages offered as part of the Australian Curriculum
- The number of Indigenous languages that can be studied and examined at Year 12 level
- The number of schools, primary and secondary, that are offering an Indigenous language and at which year levels
- The number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students studying an Indigenous language in schools and the levels at which they are studying that language.

Information on these measures could be collected from schools as part of their required annual reporting. Consideration could be given to publishing the information on the My School website to signal its cultural importance.

A focus on culture and language could also prompt further government investment in developing new cultural resources for schools, such as additional support for the teaching of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island histories and cultures cross-curriculum priority within the Australian Curriculum, or the development of early learning apps for Indigenous languages within the federal government's ELLA program.

A further measure of cross-cultural learning comes ready-made in the National Assessment Program for Civics and Citizenship (NAP-CC).<sup>6</sup>

NAP-CC is undertaken by a sample group of Year 6 and Year 10 students every three years and includes a survey of students' attitudes towards Indigenous cultures. Students are asked to rate the strength of their agreement or disagreement with five statements:

1. Australia should support the cultural traditions and languages of Indigenous Australians.
2. Australia has a responsibility to improve the quality of life of Indigenous Australians.
3. It is important to recognise the traditional ownership of land by Indigenous Australians.
4. All Australians have much to learn from Indigenous Australian cultures and traditions and people.
5. All Australians should be given the chance to learn about reconciliation between Indigenous and other Australians.

The 2016 NAP-CC report finds some significant positive changes in attitude as measured against these statements since the 2010 testing and survey program; however, the data also indicate that in 2016 Year 10 students were less likely than Year 6 students to agree that ‘All Australians have much to learn from Indigenous Australian cultures and traditions and people’ (page 69).

Making recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures a formal national target and reporting against it will serve to focus attention on its importance and support efforts to improve our readiness as a nation for two-way learning. It will also help to recast close the gap targets to avoid the problems associated with use of deficit models.

The danger of a deficit model in describing opportunity gaps for Indigenous Australians is that it serves to support a ‘them and us’ view in which all the deficits are related to ‘them’. To be preferred is a more inclusive model, one that is able to embrace the notion that all Australians must change if we are to heal what has been described by one AHISA member as ‘a wound in this nation that if left untended will cause our nation to walk with a limp’.<sup>7</sup> ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gooda M (2010) Speech delivered to QCOSS Regional Conference, 12 August 2010. Accessed at <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/news/speeches/social-justice-and-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples-access-services-2010>.

<sup>2</sup> Armstrong S, Buckley S, Lonsdale M, Milgate G, Kneebone LB, Cook L & Skelton F (2012) *Starting school: a strengths-based approach towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children*. Report prepared by ACER for the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. Accessed at [https://research.acer.edu.au/indigenous\\_education/27](https://research.acer.edu.au/indigenous_education/27).

<sup>3</sup> The two parts of AHISA's submission are available in full at <https://www.ahisa.edu.au/AHISA/Advocacy/Submissions/AHISA/Advocacy/Submissions.aspx?hkey=043c92ca-d66a-4bfd-93b4-ec8ca77d8925>.

<sup>4</sup> Guenther J, Disbray S & Osborne S (2016) *Red dirt education: A compilation of learnings from the Remote Education Systems project*. Alice Springs: Ninti One Limited. Available at <https://www.nintione.com.au/resources/rao/red-dirt-education-a-compilation-of-learnings-from-the-remote-education-systems-project/>.

<sup>5</sup> In Wilson L (2016) Closing the gap: Leading innovation in Indigenous education. *Independence* 41(1):76-81. Available at <http://independence.realviewdigital.com/?iid=142473#folio=80>.

<sup>6</sup> NAP-CC reports are available at [http://nap.edu.au/results-and-reports/national-reports#NAP\\_sample\\_assessments](http://nap.edu.au/results-and-reports/national-reports#NAP_sample_assessments).

<sup>7</sup> Phillip Heath in Wilson, op cit, page 81.