

EXCLUSIVE MEDIA RELEASE

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Standards the key to address ‘off country’ education for Indigenous students

Whilst a recent Australian National University (ANU) research, reported in The Guardian (6 September), found that 59 of 100 young people from one community dropped out in their first year of “off-country” boarding there are also many examples where there are positive boarding experiences for Indigenous students that result in successful academic outcomes.

However, as this ANU study claimed, the experience for many Indigenous young people is that educational boarding “off-country” is a revolving door that is “comprehensively failing” Aboriginal children and their families. This finding echoes those of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs (HORSCIA) that found *despite the best intentions of many boarding facilities, the overwhelming evidence heard by the committee was that boarding, particularly mainstream boarding, is not meeting the needs of Indigenous students*¹.

For those young Indigenous people living in regional and remote Australia there are few education options other than to leave their family and country to become boarding students in unfamiliar cities large distances from home. As the Minister for Indigenous Australians, Hon. Ken Wyatt MP OAM, himself a former boarding student, acknowledged “that for some secondary school students, studying away from home is the best option to complete their education.”

However, as Mr. Anthony Bennett, Chairperson Indigenous Education & Boarding Australia (IEBA), emphasised, ‘for many students from remote and regional Australia a boarding education is the **only option** they have got that will provide quality educational outcomes.’

Indigenous young people are amongst the most vulnerable in our community. They are far more likely to be in child protection, in detention, sick, unemployed or have attempted suicide. Education is foundational to changing the appalling statistics for First Nations people and giving every young Australian a better chance.

‘Education is the key to overcome systemic disadvantage, particularly for students from remote and regional Australia. Whilst the boarding sector does an admirable job of providing a caring stable environment for Indigenous students, it is troubling that in 2020 there isn’t a recognised national Indigenous cultural standard for boarding schools and residences’ claims Mr Bennett.

IEBA believe that standards are fundamental to quality. Since the release of the HORSICA findings, Indigenous Education & Boarding Australia, a social enterprise driven by a vision **that all Indigenous students attain educational outcomes to be successful in their future choices**, has led the development of an Australian Indigenous Boarding Education and Cultural Standard.

¹ HORSCIA *The power of education: From surviving to thriving Educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*, Dec 2017, Ch 6.59, p 111

The CEO of IEBA, Mr Greg Franks states ‘The Australian Indigenous Boarding Education and Cultural Standard will provide guidance for schools and residences, sets the expectations and provides assurances to Indigenous families that their children are being appropriately cared for, are receiving an education that meets their needs and that this is delivered in a culturally safe environment.’

In March 2020, IEBA held the 3rd National Indigenous Education and Boarding Symposium. In his keynote address, The Hon Warren Snowdon MP, HORSCIA Deputy Chairperson, highlighted the need for a cultural standard for boarding schools and residences.

‘Parliament has committed to the new Closing the Gap education target of 96% of Indigenous students achieve year 12 by 2031. The Australian Indigenous Boarding Education and Cultural Standard will make a significant contribution to this target. We now need politicians of all persuasions to support Indigenous boarding students and commit to the urgent development of the Australian Indigenous Boarding Education and Cultural Standard.’ Mr Franks stated.

The establishment of a network of parents and carers of Indigenous students who study away from home is a critical element to the creation of the Australian Indigenous Boarding Education and Cultural Standard.

‘I know from many years’ experience in Indigenous education and boarding that Indigenous parents value the education and care their children receive in boarding. However, they are often disconnected from the school and don’t have a voice. Rectifying this and giving Indigenous parents a genuine voice to support their children is also critical to successful educational outcomes.’ Mr Bennett observed.

“We call on the Morrison government to support our plan for a national standard as part of their commitment to make “practical” improvements in the lives of Indigenous communities. These standards must give rise to Indigenous voices and be implemented and mandated across the country” claims Mr Bennett.

The value a family places on education is an essential factor in the academic success of students. That is why one of the key standards will need to address Indigenous parent, family and community engagement to give “voice” to those whose children are in boarding.

In December 2019 IEBA submitted a proposal to the National Indigenous Australians Agency for the development and implementation of the Australian Indigenous Boarding Education and Cultural Standard recommended for approval by the Minister for Indigenous Australians.

This proposal is driven by the following outcomes:

- The national adoption of the Australian Indigenous Boarding Education and Cultural Standard
- Implementation, training and resources for boarding schools and residences Australia wide
- The creation of an **Indigenous Voices in Boarding** Network
- The implementation of a compliance process to provide quality assurance and accountability.

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