



AUSTRALIAN PARENTS COUNCIL Inc.

Pre-Budget Submission

January 2018

The Australian Parents Council has provided parents and governments with a trustworthy voice in education policy for over 55 years. A non-denominational, non-party political organisation, we advocate for parents with children in non-government schools (Catholic and Independent) and for Australia's parent population more generally. Our interests and activities extend down to early learning and up to post-school transitions, and to the ongoing support of Parents Australia Incorporated which we established as a national charity and deductible gift recipient in 2014.

The work of the Australian Parents Council over many years, and of Parents Australia Incorporated more recently, has contributed to the improvement of children's educational experiences and outcomes, progressive reforms in schooling, and the social capital of school and Indigenous communities throughout Australia.

The Australian Parents Council acknowledges that successive federal governments have invested heavily in the schooling and early childhood domains in recent years. Even so, it is clear that this funding has not necessarily led to steady improvements in education and wellbeing outcomes for children of all ages.

The current *Review to Achieve Academic Excellence in Australian Schools*, together with the Productivity Commission's report and recommendations on our national education evidence base, will fill some of the blank spaces that still beset the education policy puzzle.

In these and wider contexts, the Australian Parents Council encourages the Australian Government to extend effort in the areas outlined below through delivery of its 2018-19 Budget:

1. Parent and family engagement
2. Funding for schooling
3. Student wellbeing
4. Early years and school readiness
5. Technology in schools and digital learning

We welcome this opportunity to contribute our views and thank you sincerely.

Mrs Shelley Hill

APC Chair

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1. PARENT AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

The Australian Parents Council appreciated the Australian Government's confirmation of parent engagement as a key education pillar in 2013, and acknowledges the provision of \$4M in the 2014-15 budget to the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), pursuant to its work with the Family-School and Community Partnership Bureau which was co-governed by the Australian Parents Council and Australian Council of State School Organisations from 2008 until it closed in 2017. ARACY's engagement work plan is set to conclude in June 2018.

In the 2015-16 Budget, \$5M was allocated for the Department of Education and Training to conduct a parental awareness communications campaign to promote and support engagement. This included development of the Learning Potential app and related website which have met with mixed success.

As well there has been significant investment in The Smith Family's educational support work with disadvantaged families and their children, the Brotherhood of St Laurence's HIPPY program and the continuance of preschool programs, particularly for vulnerable children in disadvantaged cohorts and communities.

Nevertheless, it is our considered view that more strategic and practical steps need to be put in place to embed parent and family engagement (incl. family-early learning service/school partnerships) in policy and practice to support the achievement of further improvements in education and wellbeing outcomes for children of all ages.

More active and focused parent participation in understanding and responding to education evidence and reform initiatives is key to family, school/preschool and systems change, and this requires targeted investments in a **national strategy** and **practical capacity building** on the ground. A commitment to **high quality, home grown research and data collection** is also required.

A National Parent and Family Engagement Strategy

We appreciate the Australian Government does not bear sole responsibility for progressing parent and family engagement (incl. partnership) as a social good and significant education reform. However, Australia is clearly lagging in this area and a scaled up, systemic approach to leverage the demonstrated positive effects is overdue. We consider the Australian Government is best positioned to lead the collaborative development of a national strategy to address the uncoordinated busyness that is occurring on many fronts, often without sufficient understanding of this complex domain.

In this context we observe that when the Department of Education and Training brought select engagement experts together in 2014 to discuss what needed to happen, their perspectives echoed what we have persistently communicated for over 10 years: that a committed and coordinated cross-sectoral, multi-layered national policy effort will return Australian governments and Australian society a healthy investment dividend. In summary form, the expert group concluded:

Parent Engagement needs to sit in a holistic view of student learning and wellbeing. System change is required in the way governments, schools and community organisations approach it, meaning that the kinds of policies and strategies required to ensure that parents can effectively engage need to be re-thought and changed to reflect a holistic understanding of student learning, wellbeing and family support structures. Key areas requiring change include school culture, community understanding, beliefs and attitudes, capacity building for parents, teachers, school leaders and the community, harmonising home and family with community resources, and creating a shared language for parent engagement.

A whole-of-government approach is required. This cooperation needs to expand past current governments or election cycles and focus on the long term good of school communities. Frequent government policy and programme changes are a key reason why many parent engagement strategies have limited long term sustainability.

Practical Capacity Building

We consider that the areas below presently warrant particular policy and funding attention.

Engagement in Boarding and Residential Contexts

The Australian Parents Council led brief research (2014-15) to examine understandings of parent and family engagement in boarding contexts, and provide the Australian Government with preliminary advice on additional educational supports boarding schools, including those with Indigenous students, might need to assist them to meet the engagement requirements (Section 5) in the (then draft) *AS5725 Boarding Standard for Australian Schools and Residences*. The Standard outlines the *minimum set of requirements* that will deliver a safe, healthy and productive environment for boarders and was published in June 2015. While voluntary, its implementation is strongly supported by the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA) and Boarding Australia and it is expected that it will become an important benchmark for many boarding service providers over time.

Nine recommendations, including several pertaining specifically to Indigenous students and families, derived from our research and, overall, we concluded that engagement in boarding and residential contexts is a neglected policy and practice area. It is clear that more effort must be directed at understanding what engagement means, how it works and how it can be leveraged when families are physically separated by lengthy distance, have variable access to technology and are potentially constrained by school, boarding staff and their own constructions of the *in loco parentis* role.

We note the subsequent conduct of the *Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students* (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2016-17) and release of its report with recommendations, *The Power of Education: From Surviving to Thriving* (December 2017).

In relation to the AS5725 Standard and boarding service provision in general, we consider that funding is desirable to support the following capacity building initiatives:

- a. The development of training units to enhance theoretical knowledge and practical skills in parent, family and community engagement (incl. partnerships) and explore application to boarding/residential environments (as per Section 5 of the Standard). These units could be drawn from the *Certificate IV in Parent, Family and Community Engagement* which is owned by the Australian Parents Council and offered online and face-to-face through Lee Hecht Harrison P/L, a global leader in leadership development and registered training organisation.
- b. The establishment of a collaborative stakeholder project to develop a continuous improvement framework for Section 5 of the AS5725 Standard to:
 - Support boarding service providers to evaluate their current performance and identify and measure improvement goals.
 - Investigate how key elements of Section 5 could be incorporated into survey instruments, including *School Survey* and MMG Education satisfaction reviews.
 - Research boarding parents' perspectives on engagement in their children's schooling and learning.

- Research Section 5 requirements in residential contexts (e.g. with Aboriginal Hostels Limited).
 - Drive and document examples of good parent/family engagement (incl. partnership) practice in boarding environments.
 - Facilitate an open culture across boarding schools and residences, and support regional forums and learning networks.
- c. The coordinated development of a suite of downloadable e-resources to inform and support all boarding parents including in relation to being confident parents, transitioning children to boarding, the management of student and family anxiety, engagement in schooling and student learning from a distance, and education trends and policy.

In relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students, we provide these two recommendations from our 2014-15 exploratory research for funding consideration:

- d. That, having not been reviewed since 1998, the ABSTUDY scheme be comprehensively reviewed and with consideration of the engagement benefit of financially supporting parents to attend schools for annual inductions that incorporate the engagement principles of academic socialisation and parent role construction and the celebration of significant milestone graduations in Years 10-12, and current arrangements for student suspensions, expulsions and medical expenses.
- e. That the Australian Government consider the circumstances in which it might provide funding to support boarding schools with high, remote Indigenous student populations to make community visits to engage Indigenous parents and communities in schooling.

In relation to the recommendations of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs (December 2017), we particularly support to the following recommendations:

- Recommendation 1: Invest in comprehensive data collection and analysis of the characteristics that influence student achievement.
- Recommendation 2: Be accepting of and provide more opportunities for school-age Indigenous mothers to continue their studies.
- Recommendation 4: A consistent policy in relation to Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder being recognised as a disability for the purposes of school and support service funding.
- Recommendation 6: Establish and implement an integrated model of health and education delivery to locate medical services within school grounds or nearby.
- Recommendation 9: Reform of policy approach and processes for evaluating grant applications under the IAS to provide funding parity for girls.
- Recommendation 5 (part): Require all teachers in schools with significant Indigenous student numbers to complete in-service in local Indigenous language, history and culture training.
- Recommendation 15: Creation of a National Boarding Strategy by 2020 to *meet the standards outlined in the AS5725 Boarding Standard for Australian Schools and Residences*, meet a National Indigenous Cultural Standard and recognise and appropriately account for the physical and mental health needs of Indigenous students. [plus Recommendations 16 – 17]
- Recommendation 18: Conduct a thorough review of ABSTUDY.

Teacher Training and Professional Development

The Australian Parents Council considers that initial teacher education programs and graduate teacher professional development activities need to have a sharper and deeper focus on:

- Developing competency in the facilitation of creative and collaborative learning environments.
- Understanding and implementing a range of teaching and learning approaches to best suit children's individual learning and development needs.
- Understanding and implementing social and emotional learning for young children and students.
- Growing the knowledge, skills and relational mindset to value and encourage parents' positive and productive engagement in their children's home-based and school-based learning (which links to the points above).

Teacher competence in building authentic partnerships with parents, families and communities will greatly assist the co-development of shared responsibility and accountability for outcomes which the evidence shows can serve as a valuable catalyst for improvements in academic achievement and other indicators of development.

The Australian Parents Council has self-funded development of the *Certificate IV in Parent, Family and Community Engagement* which is accredited by the Australian Skills Quality Authority and available nationally through a reputable registered training organisation (Lee Hecht Harrison P/L RTO 21530).

We consider that a cluster of units in this qualification could be packaged into a nationally recognised skills set and offered in a scholarship arrangement to a set number of pre-service and graduate teachers to develop the necessary competence to effectively facilitate parent/family engagement and pre-school/school-community partnerships.

We also consider within the context of a national parent and family engagement strategy, that the Australian Government could provide small-scale funding for partnership projects that would see these scholarship holders move forward to develop partnerships in their local pre-school/school communities. This body of practice, based on sound theoretical knowledge and evidence, could then be evaluated and embedded more widely in Australian schools/early learning services.

Parent-to-Parent Engagement Programs

Children's early literacy and numeracy acquisition is the basis for schooling success and life-long learning. Established and fostered in the early years, both families and schools have the shared responsibility to make this a priority.

The Australian Parents Council's parent-to-parent programs - *Successful Learning in the Early Years* and the *Indigenous Parent Factor: Successful Learning in the Early Years at Home and School* build parent understanding of the importance of early learning, reading, writing and mathematics and the confidence to engage in positive and productive ways. They provide strategies and positive reinforcement for the home environment as well as strategies for partnering with teachers and schools.

Whilst the Smith Family's and other currently funded programs focus on the child, the APC's programs have a central focus on the parents and are effective, brief interventions.

Accordingly, we believe that these programs fill an important space that would otherwise be vacant, and would appreciate some funding support to extend our delivery to cohorts and communities in need.

Australia's Evidence Base

The Productivity Commission's report on our national education base makes a range of recommendations. In particular, we support funding for:

- The recruitment of a new longitudinal study cohort of Australian children.
- Research and other data collection/analysis activities to address the significant gap identified in relation to aspects of parent engagement and the culture of the home learning environment (for children of all ages, not just young children).
- Research and other data collection/analysis activities to examine the contribution of early childhood and care to outcomes (e.g. through funding support for the *National Early Childhood Developmental Researchable Data Set* or other avenues).
- The establishment of a privately run institution created through a competitive tender process to perform the functions needed to deliver a bottom-up approach, including development of research priorities and researcher capacity, commissioning of high-quality education research, communication and implementation of high-quality evidence, and establishment of co-operative partnerships.

2. FUNDING FOR SCHOOLING

Students with Disability

Funding for students with disability in non-government schools remains a critical issue for parents, schools and the students themselves. While there has been some good progress, the Australian Parents Council believes the needs of these students must be placed at the forefront of policy and budgetary agendas.

Current funding arrangements are still far from consistent, exacerbating the uncertainties and anxieties that parents, particularly in the non-government school sector, have in respect of their children's funding entitlements and education support needs.

We recognise the challenges for the Australian Government in implementing the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and are aware that the National School Resourcing Board intends to review the student with disability loading and effective usage of the national data collection for these students at some point in the future. It is critical that the loading issue is settled transparently and fairly across school sectors, and that there is adequate funding to meet increasingly complex needs.

As noted earlier, the Australian Parents Council also supports the development of a consistent policy in relation to Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder being recognised as a disability for the purposes of school and support service funding.

Capital Funding

The Australian Parents Council has expressed its concern to the Federal Minister for Education and Training about school enrolment forecasts for all school sector. The funding of new schools and classrooms to accommodate the expected growth in student numbers needs to be co-operatively addressed with capital funding.

3. STUDENT WELLBEING

The Australian Parents Council considers that student wellbeing requires an accelerated and more intentional focus alongside educational outcomes. In this context, we acknowledge the Australian Government's 2017 grant of approx \$53M across two years to *beyondblue* to develop an integrated end-to-end school-based mental health program and national workforce support and would welcome further funding, including for research, in this area.

4. EARLY YEARS AND SCHOOL READINESS

The Australian Parents Council supports calls for children in early learning settings and extending into primary schools to receive social emotional training to deal with the complex social issues being confronted by children at a young age, especially in relation to the increasing nature of digital communication.

APC supports the continuation of universal access to quality early learning for all children in the year before formal schooling begins.

5. TECHNOLOGY IN SCHOOLS AND DIGITAL LEARNING

The Australian Parents Council's Parentech campaign run throughout 2017 provided a body of evidence that many parents and children continue to have difficulty navigating the complexities of digital technology and communication.

To address this, we would like to see general capabilities of digital citizenship be a prime focus alongside partnership and shared vision with parents, on technology purchase and use, creation and active citizenship. We believe it is crucial that enabling and empowering student learning alongside having the necessary focus on self-regulation skills that build capacity and capability to handle their online world is the only way to foster active citizenship.

However, we are increasingly concerned that "Bring-your-own-device" (BYOD) is the means by which technology is being implemented in schools, adding a recurrent cost to parents and at the same time seeing schools develop their own protocols instead of a consistent national framework. With the onset of national testing, devices together with a technology plan for schools is expected, yet parents are left to pay for these devices.

Current BYOD schemes in schools are adding a recurrent cost to parents and is not a sustainable option no matter what sector. APC calls for a rebate or a tax deduction for all devices required for education purposes.