



SUPPORTING THEIR FUTURES

A SUSTAINABLE MODEL FOR
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT
ISLANDER BOARDING

October 2024



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Independent Schools Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognises continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay respect to Elders past and present, and commit to the ongoing journey of reconciliation.



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Independent Schools Australia
12 Thesiger Court Deakin ACT 2600
T 02 6282 3488 **W** isa.edu.au

ABN 83 005 118 927
PO Box 324 Deakin West ACT 2600
E isa@isa.edu.au

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1. INTRODUCTION – A LIFELINE FOR INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from regional and remote communities, boarding schools represent more than just a place of learning—they are a lifeline. In the absence of local educational facilities, these schools offer the only opportunity for thousands of students to access a high-quality education. Yet, despite their critical importance, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding schools are at a crossroads.



These schools work tirelessly to address the unique and often complex needs of their students. Beyond academic instruction, they provide essential support for well-being, cultural continuity, language preservation, and spiritual growth. Independent boarding schools recognise the significance of maintaining connections with students' families and communities, fostering an environment where students can flourish both academically and individually. They offer a culturally rich experience, honouring the diverse traditions and languages that shape their students' identities.

However, this invaluable service is under threat. Over the past decade, inadequate and inconsistent funding has led to the closure of two Indigenous boarding schools, with a third being forced to cease its boarding operations. Today, only nine majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding schools remain, and they are struggling to survive. The financial pressure to meet the costs of providing boarding services has become unsustainable, and without urgent, stable funding, more schools are at risk.

These schools are not just vital to the students they serve—they are essential to the future of Indigenous communities. Without them, the educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians will only widen. A long-term funding solution is desperately needed to provide these schools with the security to plan for the future, retain skilled staff, and continue to offer a culturally safe, nurturing environment where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can succeed.

The case studies included in this report highlight the difficult situation many boarding schools currently find themselves in, and the urgent need to address the shortfall in funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students.

The time to act is now. Without immediate intervention, we put at risk the futures of thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait students across the country.

2. ABOUT ISA

Independent Schools Australia (ISA) is the national peak body for Independent schooling in Australia. ISA represents the sector on national issues and engages with the Australian Government, national agencies, media, key stakeholders, and the wider Australian community.

Working with the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs), ISA represents 716,800 students, over 1,215 schools and a workforce of 122,000 people.

Independent schools are long-established partners in Australia's education system, alongside government and Catholic schools. They make a valuable contribution to society and the learning and wellbeing of Australian children.

The Independent school sector is diverse, and schools serve a wide range of communities. The latest available data shows that more than one in six Australian school students attends an Independent school. For secondary students, it is over one in five.

Students at Independent schools reflect the full diversity of Australian society – including those who experience one or multiple forms of disadvantage. These students include:

- high-needs students with disability attending special schools
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending remote 100 per cent Indigenous schools
- students living in regional, rural and remote locations
- highly disadvantaged and disengaged young people attending Independent special assistance schools.

Most families with children enrolled in Independent schools are middle-to-low-income earners, increasingly from culturally diverse backgrounds, and residing in outer-suburban and inner-suburban communities. Many of these families are currently facing economic stress and are making substantial sacrifices for their children's education.

According to the most recent data, the majority of Independent schools charge annual fees of less than \$6,000, and there was a greater number of schools charging less than \$1,200 per year than those charging over \$20,000. Some Independent schools charge no fees at all. More than half of the sector's recurrent income comes from parents and families.

Many Independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a specific educational philosophy or alternatively recognised curriculum. Some have been established by community groups seeking to meet particular needs or to reflect the religious values of a community. Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for eight per cent of the Independent sector's enrolments.

Most Independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example, Lutheran schools. Systemic schools account for 20 per cent of schools in the sector but the majority of schools in the sector are autonomous non-systemic schools.

3. ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER BOARDING IN THE INDEPENDENT SECTOR

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from regional and remote communities are some of the most educationally disadvantaged students in Australia. For many of these students, there is limited or no access to school education, particularly at the secondary level. An Independent boarding school is often the only option for regional or remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who must board away from home to access education.

The Independent sector is the largest provider of boarding school education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are educated across a range of settings and in different types of schools in the Independent sector. Some Independent boarding schools provide education to significant numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, while others have entire Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student cohorts.

In 2023, twenty-five Independent boarding schools had more than 30 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students. Of these schools, nine had 100 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students, totalling 606 enrolments. Close to half of the 2,335 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders in the Independent sector attend schools with either very large numbers or a high concentration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders.

Many of these students come from remote communities where primary-level education is the only schooling locally available and they must leave their communities to undertake secondary studies.

Often these schools serve students and families with limited or no capacity to contribute to the costs of their children's educational and boarding needs. Government funding, including ABSTUDY payments, play a central role in funding these services.



4. KEY POINTS

There is a critical need for extra resources to assist Independent boarding schools that educate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These schools are significantly contributing to the education of some of Australia's most disadvantaged students. Without certainty of additional funding support, more of these exceptional schools could close, putting their students' futures at risk.

This report provides four case studies of the current challenges facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding schools, and highlights the following key points of focus on this urgent national issue:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from regional and remote communities are some of the most educationally disadvantaged students in Australia.
- Due to the lack of educational facilities and opportunities, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from regional and remote communities are educated away from their home communities in boarding schools.
- The Independent sector is the largest provider of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding education in Australia.
- The additional costs of educating students from regional and remote communities in boarding schools away from their families and communities include not only living and educational support, but also health, pastoral and cultural support, and costs associated with maintaining links to home communities. For boarding schools where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities make up all or the majority of the student body, these additional costs threaten the financial viability of boarding provision.
- These extra costs have been examined, quantified and validated by several independent studies and reports commissioned by governments in recent years.
- As shown in these independent reports, the additional costs of educating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in boarding schools with large numbers of these students are not being met. Schools are addressing this demonstrated shortfall through a variety of means, all of which impact the viability of schools and the quality of education that can be provided.
- The number of Independent boarding schools educating both large numbers and high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students from remote communities is small, between 10 – 15 schools.

Additional ongoing funding for Independent schools educating large numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students must be provided as a matter of urgency so that the ongoing viability of these schools can be assured.



CASE STUDY 1

YIRARA COLLEGE, NT



Located just outside of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory, Yirara College wants to enable its students to respect and live out their spiritual and cultural identities.

Principal Wesley Meurant knows that by supporting Yirara College's 185 boarding students, they are providing a vital service to the school community. 'Standardised schooling cannot cope, accommodate or home any of our students. The remote communities know this, which is why they strongly desire to see their children come to Yirara.'

As a testament to its success, Yirara currently has 3rd generation students enrolled at the school, whose grandparents were students of the school in the 1970s. Yirara has become a 'right of passage' for many community members across the Northern Territory, and the benefits the school offers to Aboriginal youth are widely recognised.



Value and Demand of Boarding

Boarding services not only offer value for the student, but also their community and family. 'Visiting remote communities and speaking with elders and families, they all want and ask for the same thing, they want choice. Choice as to where to send their children and the option to send their children out of community life if there is a need to do so. The reality for many families in community is that community schooling and education is not appropriate for most children and as such, options for education in boarding schools are essential' said Principal Meurant.

Remote community schools struggle consistently with attracting and retaining quality educators. This results in varied levels of educational outcomes in different communities. Boarding schools provide consistency and ensure outcomes. They are also able to provide access to VET programs and can upskill students who desire to go back to community.

Yirara College's ability to increase its student numbers is limited to the level of funding that it receives from grant programs. Meeting the growing demand without additional funding would mean increasing student/staff ratios and risking damage to staff morale and retention. Many enrolment applications are rejected due to Yirara's limited ability to increase staff numbers in areas of need, such as academic and wellbeing support.

Due to the nature and environments that Yirara's students come from, the demands on staff can be extreme. Most of its students enter Year 7 with a reading level equivalent to a Year 1 student. This gap in education demands intense assistance. Coupled with the high proportion of students at Yirara who are living with disability (50 per cent of its students require substantial adjustment needs), Yirara College requires a high level of staffing and support.

As a consequence of underfunding for Aboriginal students in boarding, Yirara struggles to employ the services and necessary staff to ensure optimal running of the college.

Student Needs

Many of Yirara's Aboriginal students require additional support and care due to complex backgrounds and for some, having lived in severe disadvantage. Additional student needs include:

Cultural needs – Boarding schools need to have access to community leaders and significant family members from home communities to ensure connection is maintained. Cultural differences are also vastly disparate from one community group to another region's community group, so care and attention are a necessity when supporting these connections.

Language needs – Students from community locations often learn English as a second language. Constant encouragement for students to speak their traditional language and share their language is an important step towards validation and cultural acceptance.

Spiritual needs – The vast majority of Aboriginal students from community possess a strong sense of spirituality and will often attribute daily interactions, problems or sickness as a spiritual consequence. Understanding and respect of this worldview is required.

Facility maintenance and borrowing capacity

Yirara College was built in 1972 with money provided by the Commonwealth Government. There hasn't been a significant capital injection since that time. As the school is a not-for-profit, and all spending is non-discretionary, the ability to maintain the physical infrastructure of the school, also given the inadequate funding for students, is severely limited.

Insurance policies will no longer cover Yirara for water damage during the wet season due to the school's inability to service the outdated roofing structures. Yirara has therefore needed to look for loans to ensure that it can conduct repairs, which is incredibly difficult as commercial banking institutions consider Yirara's capacity to service a loan as a high-risk proposition given inadequate recurrent funding sources for Aboriginal students in education.

Funding uncertainty

According to Principal Meurant, when considering all factors, Yirara students are already underfunded by nearly \$12,000 per student every year. Almost all of the staffing, maintenance and educational challenges Yirara faces can be attributed to this shortfall in funding.

The impact of the loss of the Indigenous Boarding Provider grants on student outcomes would be 'disastrous' says Principal Meurant. If Yirara ceased to operate in Central Australia, there would be no options for the remote community children who the school supports. This would result in widening academic outcomes, a deterioration in cultural, social and emotional outcomes and communities feeling helpless to provide for their children's futures.

Without Yirara, its remote Aboriginal students would almost certainly disengage from education in the secondary schooling years. Yirara is the leading option for secondary schooling outcomes in the Central Australian desert. The College's Lutheran heritage prepares young people for productive lives post-school. Without Yirara as an option, the effects would be felt for generations.

Yirara's students are among the most disadvantaged in Australia, which leaves Principal Meurant bewildered that funding is not being established as a priority. 'The only way to close the gap is to broaden and deepen support through positive grant making and funding opportunities. This can be achieved through supporting the choices of Aboriginal families and validating those choices.'

Principal Meurant paints a dire picture of the future if Yirara College is not able to secure sufficient ongoing funding to continue to offer boarding services. 'We are a 95 per cent boarding provider. Without boarding there would be no school.'

5. THE FUNDING GAP FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER BOARDING STUDENTS

To ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities are engaged and supported in culturally appropriate ways in their school education, there are significant additional costs incurred by boarding schools enrolling these students. The types of additional services required to be provided by Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding schools include:

- Boarding house parents with high staff-to-student ratios.
- Culturally appropriate training and support to ensure the enrolment and retention of students.
- Pastoral care to meet the often complex and high-level needs of students including those from disrupted and traumatic backgrounds.
- Health services – students often have complex and chronic health needs, including undiagnosed disabilities, which require ongoing and comprehensive monitoring and treatment.
- Social and emotional support for students living away from home who have strong family, community and cultural links with their community.
- The need to ensure staff are familiar with and can build and maintain links and understanding of students' home communities.
- Additional teaching staff to provide personalised education plans, one-on-one or small group tutoring, and additional educational support outside of school hours, to address students' often significantly lower education achievement levels.
- Transport costs – both staff and students may need to travel multiple times between school and communities for a variety of educational, cultural and pastoral reasons.
- Cost of administering ABSTUDY and other government services on behalf of the school and student families.
- Extra salaries and travel expenses for liaison officers who facilitate communication between the school, families, and communities.

The additional support needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are currently not being met by existing funding mechanisms. The reasons for this underfunding include:

- Schools cannot charge fees for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities as their families have no capacity to pay.
- The loading for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students provided under the School Resource Standard funding through the Australian Government's Department of Education is for 'in-school' education-related expenses, not for essential support requirements to engage and retain students whilst living away from home.
- There is no specific Australian Government payment to schools to support the needs of disadvantaged students who can only access school education through boarding.
- The current level of ABSTUDY does not factor in the support requirements of high-needs students living away from home.
- The level of ABSTUDY transport support is limited and does not adequately address the costs of essential student travel or permit an appropriate level of flexibility in its application.

Schools are addressing the shortfall in available resources by either cross-subsidising from other essential services or operating boarding services at a loss.



CASE STUDY 2

WONGUTHA CAPS, WA



The Wongutha Christian Aboriginal Parent-directed School (CAPS) is a co-educational Christian boarding school in Western Australia that creates a home away from home for Aboriginal youth in Years 11 and 12. The school's 60 students are all boarders, who are predominantly from remote areas of Western Australia. Wongutha CAPS prepares these students for life after schooling, with a strong Vocational Education and Training (VET) program which supports the fulfillment of student potential.

Value of boarding

Boarding at Wongutha CAPS gives students an opportunity to access schooling away from home, where educational offerings may be limited or not available. Through its VET programs, the school gives Aboriginal students exposure to other possibilities in education and training in a wide range of industry and trades such as farming, retail, hospitality. Students then take their knowledge and skills back home to enrich the community and contribute to the economy. It also provides the opportunity to engage with and build relationships with other Aboriginal students from different regions and areas.

Students who go away to boarding schools like Wongutha CAPS gain life skills and progress towards independence. Attending school in a regional (or metropolitan) area also affords students with access to sport and community groups, further expanding their social and physical development opportunities.



Student needs and facilities

To deliver high-quality boarding services such as those provided at Wongutha CAPS, significant staffing and pastoral care costs are borne by the school, over and above what the average Australian school would require. Students require support from highly qualified and experienced staff that are culturally competent and trauma informed. This support is required around the clock and can include access to medical or health and wellbeing services outside of business hours. There is also need of a higher ratio of staff to student care because of the complex backgrounds Aboriginal students at the school often have.

Further, maintaining facilities which are of an appropriate standard for the student group is an ongoing challenge for Wongutha CAPS. Principal Brendan Franzone highlights the importance of students progressing over time from highly supported to more independent living to equip them with life skills to successfully transition to further study or work. This is necessary to prepare students for independent living post schooling. This requires further development and the renovations of the current residential facilities. This will include building culturally appropriate communal areas including spaces to facilitate cultural cooking. However, without certainty around

grant payments for the school, these projects are unable to be prioritised as capital needs to be available to cover the day-to-day costs of operations. Mr Franzone expressed his appreciation to the government and National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) in particular for the recent years of funding to support boarding at the school and hoped that it will continue.

Funding uncertainty

If the current grant arrangements are not renewed, there will be a direct and immediate impact on the quality of teaching and support that Wongutha CAPS is able to provide. These impacts include:

- The level of education and care would lessen as student/staff ratios would need to be higher. This would impact student outcomes, such as academic, cultural, social and emotional development.
- Staff roles would be much more challenging, leading to potential burn out and lack of staff retention.
- Activities provided for students would become more limited in terms of frequency and variety. The provision of these activities play a crucial role in retaining students who are already prone to struggle with issues such as homesickness and cultural disconnect.
- The school would need to significantly supplement the boarding budget, taking away from other education needs, programs and support. The current NIAA funding has reduced the requirement for the school to subsidise the boarding component considerably, making it possible to deliver the significant educational support that these students need.
- As some students come from communities where there are no or limited offerings for senior high school students, it would likely be the end of their schooling.

As summarised by Principal Brendan Franzone, 'Students would not have the level of wrap around support that they currently have. Any reduction in this would be detrimental to both students and staff in all areas.'

In the case that the school could not continue to operate boarding services for their students due to rising costs and diminishing Commonwealth Government support, Principal Franzone is clear on the outcome for Wongutha CAPS, 'We would close down.' Over 70 years legacy assisting First Nations people to be equipped and empowered; vocationally, socially-emotionally and spiritually, with life skills to find a sense of hope and fulfillment, would no longer be available. This would leave a significant number of young people still striving to bring change for themselves and to their communities to be further marginalised and disadvantaged.



6. AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT FUNDING FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER BOARDING STUDENTS

Under the current Commonwealth Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) funding model, schools receive base funding plus loadings. The loadings include additional funding to address various types of educational disadvantage:

- School location
- School size
- Low socio-educational advantage
- Students with disability
- English language proficiency
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

However, in many Independent boarding schools with a high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students, the funding they receive is not sufficient to meet the specific and additional needs of their students.

Historical Additional Funding Measures

While it is true that the Commonwealth Department of Education no longer funds boarding for any students, this has not always been the case. It was the removal of specific funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and additional funding for boarding students from remote and very remote communities that first created significant funding uncertainty for these schools.

'Under the previous socio-economic status (SES) funding model, schools received general recurrent grants directly from the Commonwealth. Additional funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was provided under the Indigenous Supplementary Allowance which replaced a suite of programs with a single per-capita payment in 2009.

There was an additional Indigenous Funding Guarantee (IFG) to compensate those schools that suffered an 'unintended' funding cut on implementation of the Indigenous Supplementary Allowance designed to maintain their funding at 2008 levels until this funding 'caught up'.

In recognition of the impact on non-remote boarding schools from 2011, schools with students from remote and very remote communities boarding at a non-remote campus received an additional boarding supplement.¹

In further recognition of the funding shortfall at a number of boarding schools, the Australian Government announced in the 2014 Federal Budget that a special payment of \$6.8 million would be available to non-government schools with either a large number or large proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students.

This payment was extended for two more years in April 2015 with additional funding of \$3.6 million in 2015 and a further \$1.9 million for 2016. In 2015, 17 Independent boarding schools were eligible for this additional funding.

1 [ISCA Submissions – Parliament of Australia \(aph.gov.au\)](#)

In confirming the extension of this payment in 2015, the then Department of Education and Training described it as an interim measure to support schools while ‘the Government’s responses to the *Review of Australia’s Welfare System and the Forrest Review*,² including consideration of ABSTUDY arrangements, are underway.’

While this recognition of the additional costs was welcome, the short-term assistance provided by the Australian Government did not provide a long-term solution to the structural problem of insufficient resources to ensure the ongoing viability of these schools.

When the Final Report into the review of Australia’s welfare system, *A New System for Better Employment and Social Outcomes* was released in February 2015, it was largely silent on issues relating to the adequacy of ABSTUDY. The Forrest Review recommended simplifying ABSTUDY processes and ensuring ‘that it is sufficient to cover the full costs of students attending boarding schools from remote communities’³ however, this was not acted upon.

Recent reviews and costings

As noted above, Australian and state/territory governments have commissioned independent research into the additional costs borne by boarding schools educating students from regional and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The Australian Government commissioned the Project Vale Report⁴ and the Grant Thornton Report.⁵

Other relevant studies and reviews include:

- The Review of Funding for Schooling (‘Gonski Review’), 2011.
- A Share in the future: Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory (‘Wilson Review’) for the Northern Territory Department of Education, 2013.⁶
- KPMG Non-government Indigenous Boarding Schools Review of funding arrangements for the Northern Territory Department of Education, 2016.⁷
- The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students, *The power of education: From surviving to thriving. Educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*, 2017.⁸
- The Study Away Review, 2017 commissioned by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.⁹
- *Barriers and Bureaucracy, Bridges and Brokers* - Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research for the Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2017.¹⁰
- Indigenous Boarding Design Review 2023 undertaken by the NIAA in collaboration with the Australian Government Department of Education.

2. [Creating Parity - the Forrest review | NIAA.](#)

3. <https://indigenousjobsandtrainingreview.dpmc.gov.au/recommendation-2-school-attendance>

4. Commonwealth Department of Education Report, not publicly released

5. [boarding-investing-in-outcomes.pdf \(niaa.gov.au\)](#)

6. [A share in the future, Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory](#)

7. https://education.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/384153/Non-government-Indigenous-boarding-schools_KPMG-report.pdf

8. [Committee Report - Final.pdf \(aph.gov.au\)](#)

9. [Study Away Review \(niaa.gov.au\)](#)

10. [Barriers and Bureaucracy, Bridges and Brokers | Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research \(anu.edu.au\)](#)

The Grant Thornton Report, 2019

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet commissioned Grant Thornton to improve the understanding of the benefits and impacts of existing investments in boarding provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The review, *Boarding: investing in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students – An analysis of the investment in support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending boarding schools and facilities*,¹¹ was released in June 2019. It examined 27 boarding providers enrolling around 1,900 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island secondary boarding students.

The Report confirms the findings of previous reviews. The funding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding providers is insufficient to meet the full costs of delivering these services.

At the time of the review, the three-year average annual revenue per boarder from 2015 to 2017 at the 27 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding providers analysed for this report was \$16,679 and the comparative average cost per boarder was \$22,927, representing an average shortfall of \$6,248 per boarder.

Across the three-year average of 1,918 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders in the boarding providers included in the analysis, the shortfall per boarder represented a total annual revenue shortfall of \$11,982,732. The median average revenue and cost per boarder for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding providers in 2017 were \$18,697 and \$25,012 respectively—a shortfall of \$6,315 per boarder.

ISA understands that this funding shortfall continues today.

The report also highlighted provider concerns and issues regarding ABSTUDY, including the adequacy of ABSTUDY to meet the true cost of boarding, the complex and inflexible administration requirements, and the challenges of communicating with the ABSTUDY administration team.

The Report concludes that the higher the proportion of boarders who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, the greater the significance of the increase in the cost to boarding providers. It recommends supporting boarding providers to address the financial pressures they face when educating the highly disadvantaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders they enrol.

Grant Thornton recommended a range of additional financial supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding schools to address challenges including health support, needs-based funding for support services and improvements to ABSTUDY administration.

The Grant Thornton Review Report also reinforced the findings of the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse,¹² Recommendation 14.3, which states ‘The Australian Government and state and territory governments should ensure that needs-based funding arrangements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island boarding students are sufficient for schools and hostels to create child safe environments’.

The Report makes it clear that there is a need for additional needs-based funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students, so that schools have the capacity to provide the necessary child-safe environments.

11. [boarding-investing-in-outcomes.pdf \(niaa.gov.au\)](#)

12. [Final report | Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse \(childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au\)](#)

CASE STUDY 3

DJARRAGUN COLLEGE, QLD



Djarragun College is a non-denominational Independent College specialising in providing an excellent learning environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from Prep to Year 12. As a boarding school, Djarragun provides opportunities for students from across Australia. There are currently 25 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students at the College who come from regional communities and 115 from remote communities.



Benefits of boarding

The value that Djarragun College provides for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students includes:

- Access to Quality Education: Boarding provides students with access to a broader range of educational resources and experienced teachers, helping them achieve academic success compared to schooling options in remote communities, often where there is no secondary schooling pathway.
- Tailored Learning: Djarragun College offers culturally relevant and supportive learning environments that are sensitive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and draws on a culturally safe day and boarding program.
- Cultural Continuity: Djarragun College incorporates cultural education and practices into the curriculum, allowing students to maintain and strengthen their cultural identity.
- Peer Support: Students build connections with peers from similar cultural backgrounds, fostering a sense of community and belonging.
- Independence and Responsibility: Boarding helps students develop life skills, such as independence, responsibility, and resilience, which are crucial for personal growth and future success.
- Family Support: Boarding can alleviate some of the pressures on families by providing a stable and supportive environment for students, allowing families to focus on their roles in the community.
- Safe Environment: Boarding provides a safe and structured environment that supports the physical and emotional wellbeing of students.
- Access to Support Services: Students have access to a range of support services, including counselling and health services, to ensure their overall wellbeing.
- Career Pathways: Boarding students are exposed to various career pathways and opportunities, preparing them for successful futures beyond school.

CASE STUDY 3: DJARRAGUN COLLEGE, QLD (continued)

Growth

Djarragun College consistently receives a high number of enrolment expressions of interest and applications from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families seeking boarding opportunities for their children. The demand for boarding spaces significantly outweighs the number of available places, indicating a strong desire among families to access the educational and cultural support offered by the College.

Many students from remote communities exhibit poor school engagement, which can be attributed to various factors, including lack of resources, limited access to quality education, and socio-economic challenges.

Students often enter Djarragun College with literacy and numeracy skills well below year-level standards, requiring additional support to bridge these gaps. The complex needs of students from remote communities, including trauma, health issues, and educational challenges, require a higher level of support and resources.

The College's funding, both from government sources and ABSTUDY, does not adequately cover the costs associated with meeting the complex needs and individualised support for a larger cohort of students.

Additional funding is necessary to provide the specialised staff, resources, and programs required to support students effectively. Increasing student numbers without additional funding would strain existing resources, potentially impacting the quality of education and support provided to all students.

To maintain high-quality support and education, Djarragun College must be selective in its admission process, prioritising students who can benefit most from the available resources. This approach ensures that the College can continue to provide a nurturing environment where students can thrive academically, culturally, and personally.

The projected demand for boarding spaces at Djarragun is expected to remain high, driven by the reputation of the College and the lack of alternative educational options in remote communities. Families continue to seek opportunities for their children to receive a quality education in a culturally supportive environment.

To accommodate the growing demand, Djarragun College needs to explore options for expanding its capacity, including seeking additional funding, partnerships, and community support. Strategic planning is essential to ensure that any expansion aligns with the College's mission and capabilities, allowing it to serve more students without compromising quality.



Additional student needs

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from regional or remote Australian communities often have complex additional needs. Some examples of the additional support that Djarragun College provides to its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students include:

Area	Cost	Delivery Requirement
Individualised Learning Programs	Development and implementation of personalised education plans for each student to address the significantly lower academic abilities.	Hiring specialised staff to design and monitor these programs, including special education staff and learning specialists.
Tutoring and Mentoring Services	Providing one-on-one or small group tutoring sessions.	Hiring additional tutors, both in-house and external, to address learning gaps and offer mentorship.
Cultural Education Programs	Organising cultural events, workshops, and classes that incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and traditions.	Hiring cultural educators, guest speakers, and artists, as well as purchasing materials and supplies.
Community Liaison Officers	Employing staff dedicated to maintaining strong ties with students' home communities.	Salaries and travel expenses for liaison officers who facilitate communication between the school, families, and communities.
Mental Health Support	Providing access to mental health professionals specialising in trauma-informed care.	Hiring counsellors, psychologists, and social workers who are culturally competent and trained to address complex trauma.
Health Services	Offering on-site medical and dental services, as well as nutritional guidance.	Partnering with local health providers, funding for medical supplies, and employing a school nurse or health coordinator.
Accommodation Upgrades	Upgrading and maintaining boarding facilities to meet health and safety standards.	Renovations to ensure safe and comfortable living environments, including appropriate furnishings and amenities.
Boarding Staff	Hiring additional boarding staff to ensure 24/7 supervision and support.	Staff training in cultural awareness, trauma-informed care, and crisis management.
Student Transportation	Arranging transport for students to and from remote communities, including flights and bus services for extended periods of Sorry Business and Cultural level, beyond the beginning and end of term.	Coordinating logistics, purchasing tickets, and providing escort services when necessary.
Field Trips and Excursions	Organising educational and cultural excursions to enhance learning and cultural connection.	Funding for travel, entry fees, and accommodations for students and staff.
Extracurricular Programs	Offering a variety of extracurricular activities to promote social skills and personal development.	Funding for sports teams, arts programs, and clubs, as well as hiring coaches and instructors.
Weekend and Holiday Programs	Organising activities and support during weekends and holidays to ensure ongoing engagement.	Staff supervision, activity planning, and resources for programs that keep students engaged outside of school hours.
Cultural Competency Training	Providing ongoing professional development for staff to enhance cultural understanding and skills.	Workshops, training sessions, and resources focused on cultural awareness and inclusive practices.
Trauma-Informed Care Training	Training staff to recognise and respond to trauma-related behaviours effectively.	Access to experts in trauma-informed education and related materials for staff development.

CASE STUDY 3: DJARRAGUN COLLEGE, QLD (continued)

Boarding facilities maintenance and expansion

Djarragun College also faces challenges in maintaining and upgrading existing boarding facilities to ensure they meet contemporary standards for safety, comfort, and cultural appropriateness. Ongoing maintenance requires significant investment to address wear and tear, ensuring facilities remain safe and functional for students. The reliance on recurrent funding for maintenance also limits the capacity to invest in new infrastructure.

Funding for capital projects in boarding is limited, making it challenging to finance large-scale expansions and upgrades. Most available funding is allocated to ongoing maintenance, leaving little for significant infrastructure improvements.

The style of boarding houses needed to adequately support students with complex trauma backgrounds requires additional resources and specialised design. This need further strains the available budget for capital improvements and increases the financial burden from significant investment and resulting debt levels.

Designing culturally appropriate spaces involves integrating elements that reflect students' cultural heritage, promoting a sense of belonging and identity. This includes using culturally significant designs, materials, and facilities that accommodate traditional practices.

Boarding facilities maintenance and expansion

In 2023, the College wrote off over \$825,000 in invoiced boarding fees for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This is a result of parent's incapacity to meet a shortfall in the expected ABSTUDY subsidy, due to:

- delays in ABSTUDY approval not being retrospectively applied
- changes in ABSTUDY eligibility status after enrolment
- full ABSTUDY entitlement not achieved due to attendance testing or parent means testing
- students with allocated places withdrawing and ABSTUDY only covering pro-rata fees.

There are also other additional costs (and risks) in operating a boarding facility where parents have no capacity to pay. In particular, there is no underwriting from a parent to meet unplanned costs for their child in relation to:

- damage to property
- missed transport
- emergent and compassionate events falling outside ABSTUDY policy e.g specialist healthcare.

Boarding already operates on a very fine operating margin before these unplanned write-offs. As a result, the College's shortfall needs to be met via:

- drawdowns on any reserves held for business development and operational contingency
- deferred capital works, noting that recurrent school funds cannot be used for boarding facility improvements and/or operating costs
- overreliance on debt for both operational and capital purposes, noting that boarding related debt servicing is also subject to the above factors.

This funding and cost uncertainty, in an environment of debt stress, creates significant ongoing issues for the College. Some of the challenges and risks Djarragun College faces due to funding uncertainty are included below.

Area	Challenge	Impact
Competitive Salaries	It is increasingly difficult to offer competitive salaries to attract and retain highly qualified staff, particularly in the boarding sector. The growing demand for skilled professionals in the NDIS (National Disability Insurance Scheme) sector has intensified competition in the job market.	Djarragun College faces challenges in recruiting experienced and culturally competent staff necessary for supporting the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This can lead to high staff turnover, which disrupts student support and continuity of care.
Qualified Staff Shortages	The need for specialised staff, such as psychologists and social workers, to work during boarding hours is essential to address the additional needs of students.	The increased costs associated with hiring these professionals strain the College's budget, as they require competitive salaries and benefits to ensure their availability outside regular school hours.
Higher Ratios Required	Best practices in boarding standards recommend higher staffing ratios to provide adequate support and supervision. However, current ABSTUDY funding levels do not cover these needs.	Djarragun College must exceed standard staffing levels to ensure a safe and supportive environment, leading to additional financial pressures that are not fully covered by existing funding models.
Resource Allocation	Limited funding restricts the ability to invest in essential programs, resources, and infrastructure improvements necessary to support student development and wellbeing.	Insufficient resources can hinder the College's ability to provide high-quality educational and extracurricular programs, affecting student engagement and outcomes.
Cultural and Community Programs	Funding constraints impact the implementation of cultural and community engagement programs, which are crucial for maintaining students' cultural connections and identity.	Without adequate funding, these programs may be reduced or eliminated, potentially affecting students' sense of belonging and cultural continuity.
Budgeting and Financial Planning	Uncertainty in funding complicates long-term budgeting and financial planning, making it difficult to commit to multi-year initiatives or improvements.	The College may need to make short-term decisions that prioritise immediate needs over strategic, long-term goals, potentially compromising the overall quality of education and care.
Impact on Strategic Initiatives	Funding unpredictability affects the ability to implement strategic initiatives aimed at improving educational outcomes and student wellbeing.	Essential projects, such as facility upgrades, new program development, and technology enhancements, may be delayed or shelved, impacting the College's ability to fulfill its mission effectively.

CASE STUDY 3: DJARRAGUN COLLEGE, QLD (continued)



Impact if boarding could no longer be offered

If Djarragun College could no longer offer boarding, the impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students, particularly those from remote communities, would be substantial and multifaceted. Given that many of these students do not meet the enrolment standards expected in other boarding schools and have limited educational opportunities in their home communities, the consequences could be severe.

In many remote communities, there are limited or no educational facilities that can provide the level of education offered at Djarragun College. This means students might have no viable alternative for continuing their education, potentially leading to a complete cessation of their formal learning. Students who struggle to meet enrolment standards at other schools may face rejection or placement in schools that cannot adequately support their needs. This can result in significant academic setbacks, widening the gap between them and their peers.

Djarragun College integrates cultural teachings and practices, which are crucial for students' cultural identity and connection. Attending mainstream schools that lack cultural competence can lead to feelings of alienation and cultural disconnection. Students might struggle to maintain their cultural identity in environments that do not understand or value their background.

The transition to new schools or back to communities with limited resources can increase stress and anxiety, exacerbating any existing mental health challenges. Access to mental health support, such as counselling, may also be limited or unavailable.

Without access to quality education and career guidance, students may have fewer opportunities to pursue higher education or meaningful employment. This can limit their socioeconomic mobility and future prospects.

Boarding students often benefit from structured transition programs that prepare them for life after school. Without these programs, students may face difficulties adapting to new environments, whether in further education or the workforce.

The challenges of finding suitable alternative education may lead to higher dropout rates among boarding students. Without adequate support and options, students might disengage from education entirely, reducing their chances of achieving their potential.



7. ABSTUDY

ABSTUDY originated in 1969 as a Commonwealth Government program designed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education beyond secondary school. ABSTUDY provided grants for courses of study at universities, colleges of advanced education, technical colleges, centres for vocational training and other institutions.

Today, the program has expanded significantly beyond the original remit to assist more broadly with costs related to study, housing, living expenses and travel. ABSTUDY for students that need to study away from home now comprises a range of payment types including multiple supplementary payments and benefits:

- ABSTUDY School Fees Allowance
- ABSTUDY Living Allowance
- Additional Assistance
- ABSTUDY Fares Allowance
- ABSTUDY Incidentals Allowance.

While ABSTUDY is a key component in funding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding, many issues associated with ABSTUDY have been noted throughout this paper. These include the complexity of administration, transport arrangements and variable funding that does not meet the additional costs of boarding for most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students.

As the Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA), ISA commissioned the report, Barriers and Bureaucracy, Bridges and Brokers in 2017. It found that 'schools, along with Indigenous secondary boarding students from remote areas and their families, deal with barriers to providing education for these students. One of these barriers is the complex bureaucratic system that schools, families and students need to negotiate to obtain ABSTUDY funding.'¹³

The Barriers and Bureaucracy, Bridges and Brokers report found that there were four key areas of concern that were highlighted through consultations with Independent schools and communities:

ABSTUDY funding is inadequate

Every school indicated that the amount of boarding funding they received was insufficient to provide proper support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote areas. The costs of providing for these students is not met by ABSTUDY payments. Because they do not receive adequate funding, schools attempt as best they can to make up the shortfall from other sources.

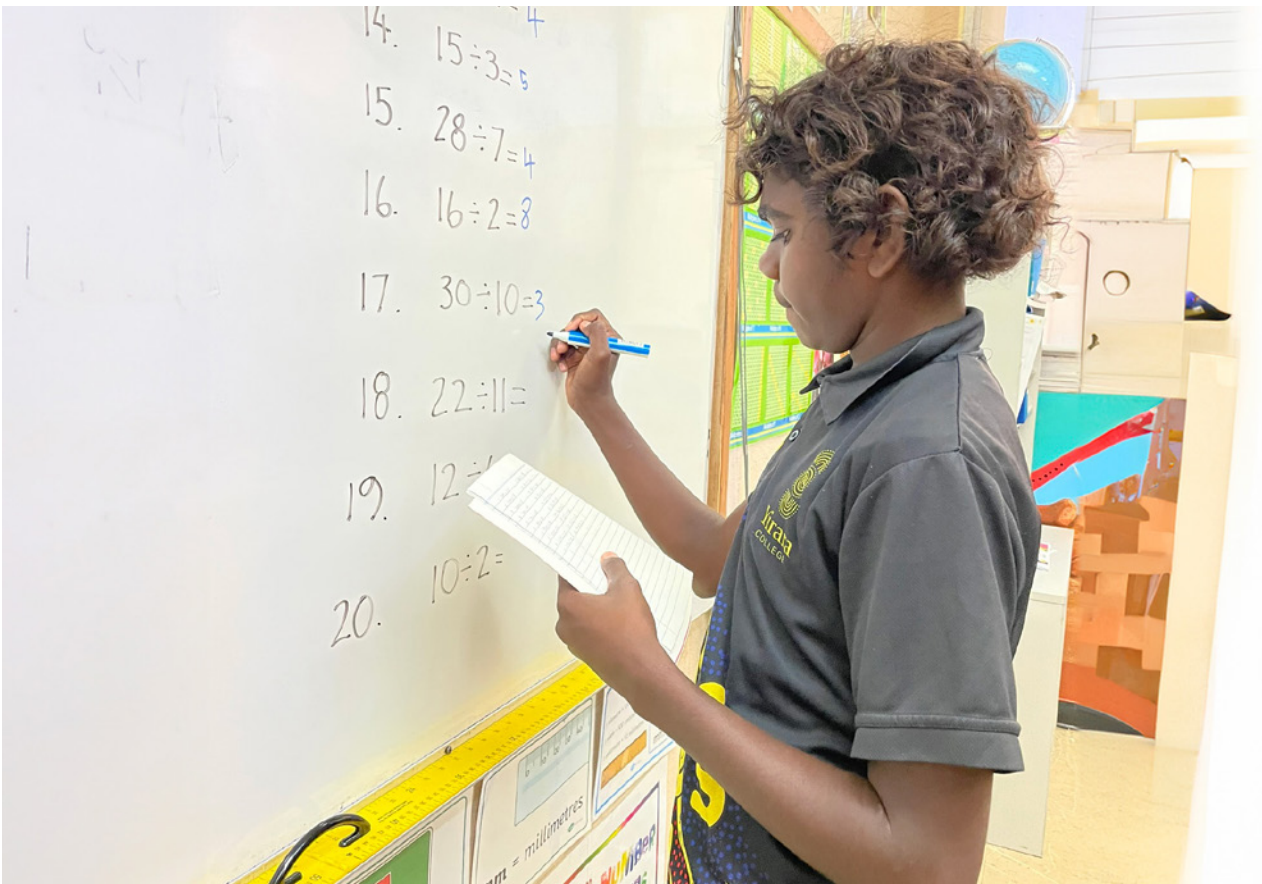
Administrative burden associated with ABSTUDY

Schools commonly reported that managing ABSTUDY payments requires a tremendous amount of administrative time. Further, the process is not a simple one. Students' families/parents/guardians need to apply for the ABSTUDY boarding funding, which is then channelled to the boarding school with the family's authority.

While this funding arrangement means the schools are in some respects at arm's length from the ABSTUDY claim process, they can also find themselves involved in identifying the best way to support families in applying for ABSTUDY.

Parental means-testing adds a further layer of complexity to the process. Students' ABSTUDY payments can be reduced once parents start earning a certain level of income. From the perspective of the schools' budgets and cash flows, the lack of transparency regarding changes in students' ABSTUDY payments is a vital concern.

13. [CAEPR - Barriers and Bureaucracy, Bridges and Brokers 2017 \(anu.edu.au\) p3](#)



Communication difficulties associated with ABSTUDY

The communication process between parents, schools and Services Australia is complicated, with difficulties being exacerbated by privacy provisions. There are several different types of communication challenges involving the different parties engaged in the ABSTUDY process including:

- information about ABSTUDY not being readily accessible to schools or families
- schools' difficulties accessing information about students' payments
- communication with Services Australia.

Management of student travel

Student travel has always been a challenging issue for schools. Though some problems relate to ABSTUDY policy, administrative procedures, funding, and services, the overall complexity of travel remains high. Schools had diverse approaches to students' travel arrangements, depending on their locations and the home communities of their students.

The report notes that 'there were some significant recurring themes. Again, the distinct character of students' home environments – remote Indigenous communities – was a common element. The distance between these communities and the students' secondary boarding school, and limited transport options creates several obstacles to education.'¹⁴

Roundtables held recently with Independent boarding schools indicate that all of these issues remain as key concerns for the boarding providers.

14. [CAEPR - Barriers and Bureaucracy. Bridges and Brokers 2017 \(anu.edu.au\) p22](#)

8. CAPITAL FUNDING

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding schools also require special consideration in relation to their capital needs.

Capital development in Independent schools is primarily funded by parents and the schools' communities. On average, these contributions account for ninety per cent of funds for capital development. It is extremely difficult for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding schools to raise private income in order to meet their capital needs, as their students' families and communities often have a limited capacity to financially contribute.

The difficulty of providing for new or improved capital infrastructure in regional and remote areas is compounded by the significantly higher costs of building materials and labour compared to metropolitan areas. Costs may be doubled or tripled due to issues such as transport fees, access to construction expertise and extended construction times due to weather delays.

Due to these factors, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding schools based in regional and remote communities can struggle to provide and maintain appropriate boarding facilities that foster an environment conducive to supporting students living away from home, while also meeting the needs of their highly disadvantaged students.

The current capital funding opportunity for boarding facilities in Central Australia is welcomed by Independent schools. However, without sufficient recurrent funding to ensure that ongoing staffing and other supports are in place, it will be difficult for schools to offer additional boarding places.



9. NIAA INDIGENOUS BOARDING PROVIDER GRANTS

Boarding schools with large numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were greatly affected by COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, as most boarding students returned to their communities for the duration of the pandemic. This significantly impacted both students' learning and schools' funding.

In response, for the last several years schools with large numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students have been able to apply for additional annual recurrent funding through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Boarding Provider grants administered by the NIAA.

The 2023 Federal Budget allocated \$21.6 million for a one-year extension of NIAA's Indigenous Boarding Providers Grant program in 2023-24 to support approximately 2,300 students across around fifty boarding providers including Independent boarding schools.

This funding has been critical to schools' ongoing ability to support and educate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students. Despite the importance of this additional funding, the Indigenous Boarding Providers Grant program funding will cease the end of 2024, leaving affected schools with limited options to address funding shortfalls. Currently there has been no funding announced to replace it for 2025 and beyond.



CASE STUDY 4

HAILEYBURY RENDALL SCHOOL, NT



Haileybury Rendall Schools' (HRS) vision is to be recognised as a great world school. Located in Darwin, Northern Territory, HRS currently enrolls four Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students from regional communities and 86 from remote or very remote communities.



A core part of HRS' culture is its commitment to Reconciliation and Closing the Gap. Its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are diverse, representing over 30 communities from across the north of Australia. There are often limited schooling options after Year 7 for young people who stay in their community. The excellent education programs provided by HRS benefits the students and the communities that they live in, as many graduates return to work and share their education as leaders, improving the lives of their family and friends.

HRS has experienced strong growth, increasing by approximately ten remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders every year. With the continuation of sufficient funding, HRS hopes to keep pace with this demand and provide access to high-quality education and opportunities to as many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as possible.

Benefits of boarding

Boarding at HRS provides a choice and the opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote and very remote communities to access an outstanding contemporary education and gives them a real chance to live and walk in two worlds – their community and the HRS campus. Strong connection with community families is an essential piece of the supportive experience.

Boarding with HRS provides an education where students can achieve their potential through focussed numeracy and literacy development, along with studies in humanities, science, health and physical education. In a culturally responsive environment that HRS has deliberately crafted, everyone involved enjoys the two-way learning that occurs, while also maintaining strong ties to culture and country.

Boarding facilities maintenance

HRS does not receive capital funding support of any kind to maintain or improve its boarding facilities. Some areas are quite tired, even with HRS gradually improving and replacing what it can with available resources. Essential improvements such as new bathrooms, improved security, and new furniture and bedding are funded entirely without government support, adding some pressure to HRS's financial viability as a boarding school.

Funding uncertainty

To fully support and provide continued excellence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, HRS is partially reliant on two major grants from the Commonwealth Government each year. One is for Indigenous Boarding Providers from remote Australia and the other is for Intensive Numeracy and Literacy education. A portion of the cost of boarding life is also funded by ABSTUDY. This support all means that even the most disadvantaged students from remote communities continue to have the chance to attend HRS, and receive an education that otherwise would not be possible.

The continuation of these grants after several years remains essential for HRS to continue support for those Indigenous students who are experiencing a disproportionate level of disadvantage and inequality. However, these grants are both expiring at the end of 2024, and HRS does not yet have a guarantee of their continuation. As a result of attempting to budget well into 2025 and beyond, this uncertainty means that HRS is hoping soon for assurances that recurrent funding will be established into the future.



10. URGENT ACTION

It is time to secure the future of Indigenous Boarding Schools.

For decades, successive governments have conducted countless reviews, all reaching the same, irrefutable conclusion: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding schools require immediate, targeted support to survive and thrive. The evidence is overwhelming and undeniable.

These schools serve as a lifeline for some of Australia's most disadvantaged students. Yet, they are being forced to operate under a constant financial strain, where the gap between income and the actual cost of delivering a culturally safe, high-quality education is widening by the day.

This crisis is not abstract. It is real, urgent, and already unfolding. In the last decade alone, two Indigenous boarding schools have closed their doors forever. One has ceased offering boarding, and unless immediate action is taken, more will follow. What will be the cost of inaction? The future of thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students hangs in the balance. These are not just numbers; they are the dreams, aspirations, and potential of young lives - of future leaders, elders, and changemakers from remote communities who depend on these schools for an education they cannot access anywhere else.

These schools are doing the heavy lifting, shouldering the responsibility of bridging the vast educational gap that exists for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Without secure, stable funding, we risk undoing years of hard-fought progress.

Now is the time for action. The Australian Government must step up and develop a long-term funding model that offers these schools the certainty they need to plan for the future - one that allows them to attract and retain passionate staff, maintain essential infrastructure, and most importantly, provide a culturally rich and nurturing environment for students who are far from home.

The solution is not complex, but the stakes are high. The cost of keeping these schools open is far less than the social and economic price Australia will pay if these students are lost to the system.





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