

Indigenous Cultural Boarding Standard to Close the Education Gap

“If we are serious about closing the Indigenous education gap, we need to have a national Indigenous Cultural Boarding Standard,” states Anthony Bennett, Chairperson of Indigenous Education & Boarding Australia (IEBA).

For young Indigenous people living in regional and remote Australia there are few secondary education options other than becoming a boarding student in unfamiliar cities large distances from home. The 2019 Closing the Gap report showed the rate of Year 12 attainment for those living in very remote areas increased from 23% in 2006 to 43% in 2016, in part due to student boarding. However, this is not on target and a long way behind the 74% achieved by young Indigenous Australians in major cities.

It is a big decision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to have their children leave home, leave their community and their country to study away. How do parents know that the school, teachers, boarding staff are going to look after their child, keep them safe, look after their health, respect their culture and provide them with the education to meet their child’s needs?

‘If parents are sending their children away to boarding, they would expect that there are standards to care for their health and well-being, to support their specific learning needs, to communicate with families and very importantly, to recognise their cultural needs’ states Mr Bennett.

‘It is hard to believe that in 2020 Indigenous student boarding is largely an unregulated industry and there are no specific standards to keep these young people safe from a cultural, emotional and physical perspective. This is despite the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, recommendations by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, and findings of the Study Away Review.’

IEBA recognises standards are fundamental to quality and safety for Indigenous students. Whilst the boarding sector generally provides a caring stable environment, there needs to be a national Indigenous cultural boarding standard for a cohort that includes vulnerable students often presenting with trauma and highly complex needs. If students are “culturally strong” it follows that academic outcomes will be enhanced. The evidence to date suggests that if organisations are not culturally safe and intelligent that indigenous students are far more likely to leave those educational settings and not be able to take advantage of the educational opportunity offered in a boarding setting.

IEBA believes this national standard will provide an ongoing assurance framework to enhance outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres straits islander students in boarding schools and residences. It would provide guidance and require boarding providers to demonstrate safe and positive outcomes for students, and provide assurance to their families, government and industry stakeholders that culture is understood and respected.

IEBA has committed to lead the development of a National Indigenous Cultural Boarding Standard starting at the [2020 National Indigenous Education and Boarding Symposium](#) in Geelong, Vic, from 17-19 March. The national symposium is the annual gathering of education leaders, boarding managers, academics, Indigenous support organisations and government policy makers. These leaders in the field will commence the work of developing the principle and framework of a National Indigenous Cultural Boarding Standard at the symposium.

IEBA acknowledges that Indigenous voices are critical in the development and validity of the standard and is proposing to establish an Indigenous Voices in Boarding network to support the development of the standard of the coming years.

‘We call on the Morrison government to support our plan for a national Indigenous cultural boarding 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’ states Mr Bennett.

‘We know from the Closing the Gap reports that Indigenous school attendance and school completion targets are not on track and the outcomes are poorest for those students from the bush. However, if we continue without standards that recognise the needs of these students how can we effectively expect to close the gap?’ asks Mr Bennett. ‘This situation cannot continue. It is time for a demonstrably basic need in education and boarding to be established as has been in aged care and childcare to name but a few.’ **END**

*[Indigenous Education & Boarding Australia](#) was launched as the trading name of Boarding Australia in March 2019 to support Indigenous students in boarding. Our vision is that **all Indigenous students attain educational outcomes that enable them to be successful in their future choices.***

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