



Submission to the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO)

The Performance Audit: Closing the Gap in Early Childhood  
Development and Schooling

March 2025

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**About Catholic School Parents Australia**

Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA) is the national representative body advocating for families with children in Catholic schools across the country. Guided by the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, CSPA recognizes the family as the primary educator and works to ensure that education policies support parental engagement, respect cultural diversity, and enhance student outcomes. We are committed to fostering inclusive and equitable education systems. We are committed to ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are central to education policy and practice.

## Catholic Education and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

Catholic schools play a vital role in the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, providing culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments that support their academic success and personal development. As of 2023, approximately 28,232.5 full-time equivalent (FTE) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were enrolled in Australian Catholic schools, accounting for about 3.6% of the total student population ([NCEC.CATHOLIC.EDU.AU](https://www.nceecatholic.edu.au)). This marks a remarkable 195.2% increase since 2000, underscoring Catholic education's long-standing commitment to expanding access and improving educational outcomes for First Nations students.

Over the past decade alone, enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Catholic schools have grown by 161%, reinforcing the sector's dedication to fostering inclusive, culturally safe, and supportive learning environments. This commitment is reflected in higher retention rates, with 89.5% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students progressing from Year 11 to Year 12 in 2023—significantly exceeding the national average of 72.8% ([NCEC.CATHOLIC.EDU.AU](https://www.nceecatholic.edu.au)).

In some remote regions, Catholic education is the sole provider of schooling, ensuring that students can remain on Country while receiving quality education. This is particularly evident in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, where 13 Catholic schools serve Aboriginal communities, with most having all or a majority of Indigenous students. In at least six or seven of these schools, Catholic education is the only option available. These schools provide crucial place-based education that fosters cultural identity and connection, highlighting the need for continued investment to sustain and enhance their impact.

The Catholic schools in the Kimberley where Catholic education is the sole provider include:

- Birlirr Ngawiyiwu Catholic School – Ringer Soak
- John Pujajangka-Piyirn School – Lake Gregory / Mulin
- Kururrungku Catholic Education Centre – Billiluna Station via Halls Creek
- Luurnpa Catholic School – Balgo Hills
- Ngalangangpum School – Warmun Community
- Sacred Heart School – Beagle Bay Community
- Warlawurru Catholic School – Red Hill

All except Sacred Heart School in Beagle Bay are located in very remote regions of the East Kimberley. These schools play a critical role in delivering education where no other providers exist, making them essential to the communities they serve.

Additionally, Catholic Flexi Schools (operated by Edmund Rice Education Australia) provide alternative education pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who may not thrive in traditional school settings. There are currently 21 Catholic Flexi Schools across Australia, supporting significant numbers of Indigenous students through flexible, student-centred approaches. These schools have demonstrated success in re-engaging young people in education, yet further funding is needed to expand their reach and ensure more students benefit from tailored learning programs.

Ensuring the sustainability and growth of Catholic education in these regions is critical. Increased investment in these schools will help maintain high retention rates, support cultural identity, and provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with equitable access to quality education, no matter where they live.

## **Introduction**

CSPA acknowledges the critical importance of Closing the Gap in early childhood development and schooling and welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) performance audit. We recognize that achieving meaningful progress requires a foundation of cultural respect, genuine partnerships, and a commitment to co-designed solutions that honour the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

As Pope Francis reminds us: “A people that does not take care of grandparents and children, that does not treat them well, is a people that has no future, because it does not have the strength or the memory to go forward.” This speaks to the heart of our belief that cultural traditions, particularly those of First Nations people, must be honoured and incorporated into education, ensuring continuity between past, present, and future generations.

## **1. Embedding Cultural Respect in Policy Development**

The success of Closing the Gap depends on policies that are developed in deep collaboration with Indigenous communities. It is essential that these policies reflect Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, and that education strategies are designed in partnership with families, Elders, and cultural leaders.

Key Observations:

- Education initiatives must be culturally responsive and guided by Indigenous knowledge systems, rather than imposed through Western frameworks.
- True partnership means ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, educators, and communities have decision-making authority in shaping the education journey of their children.
- Catholic schools, which serve a diverse student population, must be recognized as valuable partners in delivering culturally safe and inclusive education.
- As articulated in Catholic Social Teaching, families are the primary educators of children, and policies must support and empower them in their role.
- A holistic, place-based approach to education is essential in addressing the complexities of intergenerational trauma and fostering sustainable, long-term positive life outcomes.

## **Case Study: The Importance of Cultural Connection in Education**

A young Aboriginal boy was removed from Country due to family challenges and enrolled in Year 7 at a Catholic school. Coming from a remote First Nations community, he was fluent in seven First Nations languages, yet his English reading capability was assessed at a Year 3 level. His parents faced systemic barriers, including substance misuse and engagement with the criminal justice system, reflecting the broader impacts of colonization and intergenerational trauma. Traditional literacy testing and Western pedagogical methods did not align with his strengths or lived experiences.

Recognizing his cultural knowledge and intelligence, the school adopted a strengths-based, culturally responsive teaching approach. Instead of solely relying on conventional literacy frameworks, educators incorporated Indigenous ways of learning, including oral storytelling, yarning circles, and experiential outdoor lessons in an agricultural setting with horses. A reverse dictionary method—connecting English literacy with his existing linguistic knowledge—fostered his engagement and learning. These culturally grounded strategies not only improved his literacy skills but also nurtured a deeper sense of belonging and identity within the school environment.

Despite these promising educational interventions, 10 years later, the young man is now within the criminal justice system. His story underscores the urgent need for long-term, community-led approaches that extend beyond the classroom. A truly holistic education system must work in genuine partnership with First Nations Elders, knowledge holders, and families to create learning environments that reinforce cultural identity, support social-emotional wellbeing, and address the structural inequalities that continue to affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth.

Closing the Gap requires sustained investment in Indigenous-led solutions that not only enhance academic outcomes but also empower young people with the cultural resilience and community support necessary to navigate systemic challenges. Education must be more than just a tool for literacy; it should serve as a means for self-determination, healing, and reconnection to Country, culture, and kinship networks.

## **2. Culturally Aligned and Equitable Funding Arrangements**

Funding models must not only address economic disparity but also be structured in a way that respects cultural identity and supports Indigenous-led education initiatives.

### **Key Considerations:**

- Funding should be directed toward programs that empower Indigenous-led early childhood education models, incorporating language, traditions, and cultural knowledge.
- Indigenous students in Catholic and independent schools must have equitable access to funding that ensures they receive the same level of support as their peers in government schools.

- Funding processes should be simplified and designed with cultural awareness to remove barriers that may disadvantage Indigenous communities.
- Greater investment is needed in Catholic schools that serve as the sole education provider in certain regions, ensuring students can learn on Country and maintain strong cultural connections.
- More funding is needed to expand Catholic Flexi Schools, which have proven successful in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with alternative learning pathways.

**Recommendations:**

- Embed cultural competency and co-design principles in funding allocation processes.
- Ensure long-term funding stability for programs that promote Indigenous languages, cultural identity, and holistic wellbeing.
- Provide transparent reporting on how funding supports community-led educational success.

**Conclusion**

CSPA is unwavering in its commitment to creating inclusive and culturally safe educational environments while advocating for policies that effectively address disparities. Catholic education is essential in providing First Nations students with the support they deserve. We call for continued and increased investment in culturally responsive, local, place-based educational solutions to ensure equitable opportunities for all.

Contact:

Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA)

Carmel Nash

[admin@cspa.catholic.edu.au](mailto:admin@cspa.catholic.edu.au)

07 3905 9735