
INDEPENDENT
BOARDING
A NATIONAL
PERSPECTIVE

REPORT

26.05.2022

Independent Schools Australia

Independent Schools Australia is the peak national body representing the interests of the Independent school sector. ISA's role is to advocate nationally for Independent schooling in Australia, represent the Independent school sector to government and other decision-makers and organisations, and to promote the choice, diversity and contribution offered by Independent schooling, including Independent boarding schools.

Independent Schools Australia comprises eight-member state and territory Associations of Independent Schools and through these Associations, in 2021 acts on behalf of 1,187 Independent schools with some 667,000 students. Independent schools are a diverse group of not-for-profit, non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many Independent schools provide religious or values-based education. Others promote a particular educational philosophy, international curriculum or interpretation of mainstream education. Many Independent schools have been established by community groups seeking to meet unique needs. In 2021, Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for approximately seven per cent of the Independent sector's enrolments.

About this report

Independent Boarding: A national perspective, has been developed by ISA to provide a research-led and in-depth analysis of the state of boarding in the Independent sector, and to offer a detailed view on the current and future prospects of Independent schools boarding in Australia.

Independent boarding schools and state and territory Associations of Independent Schools were consulted on the issues, challenges and opportunities in boarding, as well as the needs of Independent boarding schools in providing quality education for students. These interviews are referenced as "Boarding in the Independent sector – consultation with boarding schools". Their views are represented throughout this report.

The data used in this report, unless otherwise stated, is taken from:

- ISA's *Independent Boarding Schools Data Review 2011-2020*
- *Socio-economic benefits of Independent Boarding Schools April 2022* – commissioned by ISA and undertaken by the AEC group.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Boarding schools are a critical component of educational provision in Australia. They are located in metropolitan, regional and remote areas right across the country, are large and small, single sex and co-educational, and care for a diversity of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to international boarders.

While only 2.2 per cent of Australian schools have a boarding facility and only 0.6 per cent of Australian students attend a boarding school, for many families having children board away from home is the only practical, and sometimes preferred, way to access learning, social opportunities and preparation for employment.

Boarding schools provide an important educational choice for students and families.

The Independent school sector is the largest provider of boarding in Australia, operating almost 75 per cent of all Australian boarding schools. In 2021 there were 140 boarding schools in the Independent school sector housing 14,147 students. Sixteen per cent of boarders in Independent boarding schools are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. ISA estimates that a further 13 per cent are international students and it is estimated that nationally across all sectors 71 per cent of all boarding students are from rural locations.¹

Throughout the remainder of this report, boarding school demographic data relates to 2020 and boarding school financial data relates to 2019 based on a data review of Independent boarding schools by ISA completed in 2021.

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Boarder numbers in Independent schools have remained relatively constant since 2011 despite increased access to virtual schooling and on-line education. The impacts of COVID restrictions have seen the onset of a steeper decline in student numbers from 2019 to 2020.

Boarding structures, offerings and options are varied and strive to respond to the diverse needs of families and students. Boarding schools are in metropolitan, regional and remote locations.

Parents and carers choose boarding schools based on several factors that are connected to the wellbeing and educational progression of their child and the lifestyle of the family. Many families choose boarding schools outside their own locality. Parents give the primary reasons their children board as:

- Access to education or education of higher quality
- Access to specialised subjects, extra-curricular activities and post-school options
- Geographical isolation of the family residence
- Consistency and stability of schooling
- Safety and security – offering a “home away from home”
- Opportunity for peer relationships and connection

¹ Australian Boarding Schools Association Census 2021

- Supportive pastoral care
- Family ties to a particular Independent boarding school or community

For schools enrolling international students, diversity is also an important consideration.

Research also identifies the opportunity to access specific living arrangements (co-educational, dormitory, catering for additional needs, independent of family), as further reasons families choose boarding for their children.

Eighty-three per cent of parents/carers and educators somewhat agree or strongly agree that boarding school is a positive experience for most students with over two thirds identifying the main benefits as:

- Higher academic outcomes or increased opportunities
- Greater independence and self-reliance
- Increased opportunity for social interaction with peers.

Analysis commissioned by ISA and undertaken by the AEC Group, shows the economic and social benefits of boarding schools to the Australian economy and community are considerable. Including initial and flow-on activity, at the national level, Independent boarding schools are estimated to have contributed to approximately \$1.9 billion in GDP in 2019-20, representing 0.10 per cent of the total contribution to total GDP by all industries for the year. This level of activity equates to that generated by a regional centre, such as Wangaratta. The level of employment supported by Independent boarding schools (including both initial and flow on activity) equated to approximately 0.12 per cent of national employment.

The cost benefit analysis undertaken by AEC Group estimates the present value of the benefit of Independent boarding school operations in 2020 was \$997.0 million. Based on estimated costs of \$869.6 million in 2020, the cost-to-benefits ratio of Independent boarding schools was estimated at 1:1.15, suggesting a return of \$1.15 for every \$1.00 of cost.

Independent boarding schools are estimated to have contributed to approximately \$1.9 billion in GDP in 2019-20"

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students constitute an important and growing cohort of boarders in Independent schools. In 2020, there were 2,106 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders (15 per cent of all Independent school boarders) attending 120 boarding schools (77 per cent of Independent schools).

Between 2014 and 2020, there was an approximate seven per cent growth in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders. In 2020, there were five schools in the sector where all the students were boarding, and all were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities attend boarding schools in both metropolitan and regional and remote areas, and many attend boarding schools interstate.

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders, particularly those from remote and/or highly-disadvantaged communities, the experience of boarding is new and unfamiliar. Schools are faced with extra responsibilities that are of paramount importance in ensuring that key success factors – settling into an unfamiliar environment, becoming accustomed to new academic, social and behavioural expectations and feeling culturally safe and part of a community – underpin students' transition and ongoing boarding experiences. Independent boarding schools typically provide stability and safety as

well as health, academic, social and behavioural supports and many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders see improved school and employment outcomes as a result.

In Independent schools, overseas boarders make up approximately 0.5 per cent of boarders and these students contribute significantly to both the boarding culture and the culture of the wider school community. Access to a globally-renowned education, excellent student outcomes, pathways to further study and a politically stable, safe, welcoming multicultural society are all reasons overseas families choose to send their children to an Independent boarding school in Australia.

The viability, quality and sustainability of Independent boarding schools is dependent on adequate resourcing. Australian Government recurrent funding is only available to support the recurrent costs of education and not the costs associated with boarding although there are some limited targeted Australian Government and state/territory government grants.

There is also government assistance available for families through the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Study Assistance Scheme (ABSTUDY), some state allowances and privately through scholarships. These payments are available to eligible families to support the costs associated with boarding such as fees and transport.

All Independent boarding schools are therefore highly dependent on fee income. In 2019, most boarding schools (53) charged an average boarding fee of \$20,000 to \$25,000 per boarder. However, per school, boarding fees vary significantly with average fee income ranging between \$2,200 to more than \$40,000.

In 2019, 30 per cent of boarding schools and/or the boarding facilities in a school (42 boarding schools) ran at a loss in that year with 55 per cent of these boarding schools being in regional areas. While these schools may run at a loss in any single year, they would be relying on savings and other assets to support their on-going operations.

Concerns exist over the adequacy of available funding to ensure boarding schools thrive, particularly for regional and remote and Indigenous boarding schools.

Independent boarding schools have identified several challenges for the sector, and all are connected to funding pressures:

- workforce including attracting, recruiting and training sufficient, high-quality staff
- student support including responding to student wellbeing and mental health issues; the online world; students with a disability; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders; and growing family and boarder expectations
- capital costs including new building works, upgrading, maintaining and refreshing infrastructure and the provision of equipment, information technology and furniture
- regional and remote boarding including covering the costs of goods, transport, technology and connections to family and culture, providing incentives to attract and retain a quality workforce and sourcing the capital to improve the living and learning environment.

There are, however, real opportunities to take action to respond to the challenges.

- Opportunity 1: Review government policies and funding structures to direct resources to boarding schools to support disadvantaged students, improve infrastructure and engage a skilled workforce
- Opportunity 2: Reintroduce Fringe Benefit Tax benefits for Independent schools to support workforce attraction and retention

- Opportunity 3: Introduce incentives to improve the qualifications and skills of the boarding workforce
- Opportunity 4: Increase the number of scholarships available to regional, rural and remote students, disadvantaged groups and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to improve access to boarding
- Opportunity 5: Consider updating the Australia Boarding Standard to define and guide best practices in boarding care and delivery.

If these opportunities are pursued the future of boarding is promising.

2. OVERVIEW OF BOARDING

In 2020, of the 210 boarding schools in Australia, 155 were Independent boarding schools – approximately 74 per cent of the total number of boarding facilities in Australia. While only 2.2 per cent of Australian schools have a boarding facility and only 0.6 per cent of Australian students attend a boarding school, for many families having children board away from home is the only practical, and sometimes preferred, way to access learning, social opportunities and preparation for employment.

In 2020, the Independent schooling sector had 15,901 boarding places compared to 4,415 in the Catholic sector and 2,809 in the government sector and provided boarding for 14,565 students. Approximately 13 per cent of Independent schools within Australia had boarding facilities, with almost 41 per cent of the 155 Independent boarding schools located in regional or remote locations. These regional and remote boarding schools enrol 24 per cent of all boarding school students and 62 per cent of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who attend boarding schools.

In 2020, 30 per cent of Independent schools in Northern Territory had boarding facilities, the greatest percentage in any state/territory.

Conversely, in South Australia only 9 per cent of the Independent schools in the state offered boarding, the lowest in a state/territory.

The state with the most Independent boarding schools is NSW with 48 boarding schools and 4,947 boarders. The ACT has the least number of Independent boarding schools; 2 with only 144 boarders.

Of the total number of Independent boarding schools in Australia, 59 per cent (91 schools) were located within major cities. Similarly, major cities had by far the largest number of boarders at Independent boarding schools (9,102 students).

In 2020, the average Independent schools boarding facility had approximately 94 boarders and was connected to a school with an average of 966 enrolments.

“In 2020, the Independent schooling sector had 15,901 boarding places”

TABLE 1: NUMBER AND SIZE OF INDEPENDENT BOARDING FACILITIES AND SCHOOLS BY STATE, 2020

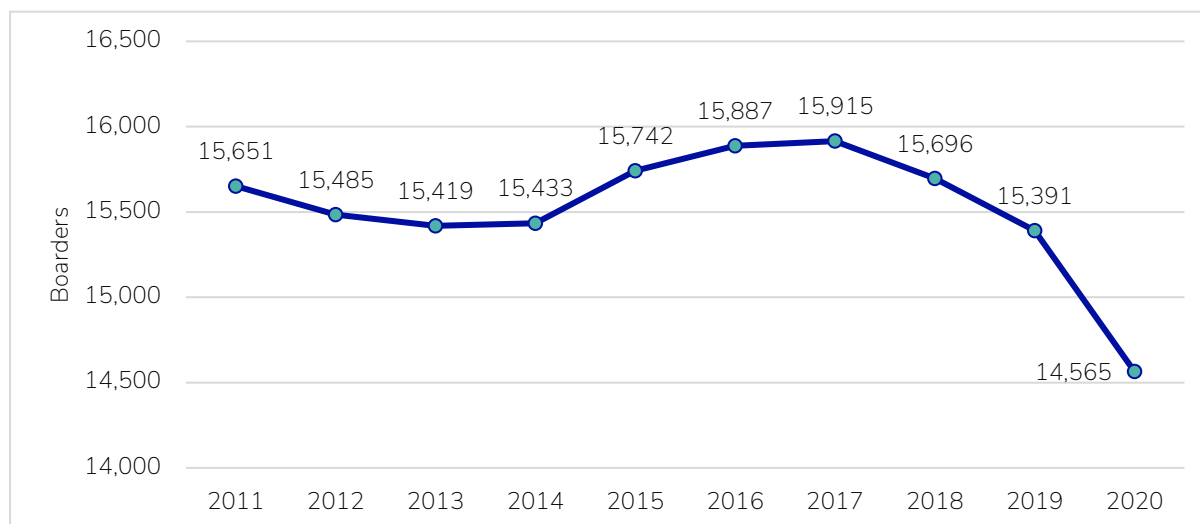
	No.	% of Independent schools	No. of boarders	Average size of boarding facility	Students at boarding schools	Average size of boarding schools
NSW	48	12%	4,947	103	47,364	987
VIC	27	12%	2,403	89	34,058	1,261
QLD	34	15%	3,736	110	30,939	910
WA	22	15%	1,773	81	16,834	765
SA	10	9%	896	90	10,274	1,027
TAS	6	18%	203	34	5,053	842
NT	6	30%	463	77	2,093	349
ACT	2	11%	144	72	3,161	1,581
Total	155	13%	14,565	94	149,776	966

Between 2011 and 2020, the Independent sector showed approximately a 17 per cent overall enrolment increase with the number of boarding schools in the Independent sector increasing by almost 11 per cent. However, the number of boarders enrolled in Independent schools has been

slowly declining with about only a third of Independent school boarding facilities, recording an increase in boarder numbers.

There is no apparent pattern in relation to the location of the boarding school, price point or student demographic, that accounts for the gradual decrease in boarder enrolment numbers. The exception is 2019 and 2020 where COVID-19 restrictions appear to have had a significant negative impact including a drop of 994 overseas students (13 per cent) since 2019.

CHART 1: INDEPENDENT SCHOOL BOARDER GROWTH, 2011 TO 2020



In 2020, there were 6,630 overseas students attending Independent schools in Australia. Of these, 43 per cent (2,830 students) attended boarding schools. If it is assumed that all overseas students who attend a boarding school are boarding at that schools' boarding facility, then overseas students make up 20 per cent of all boarders at Independent schools. (See page 19 of Independent Schools Australia's *Independent Boarding Schools Data Review 2011-2020*.)

The Independent sector is a large and growing provider of boarding facilities for Indigenous students. In 2020, there were 2,106 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders attending 120 boarding schools. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were enrolled in approximately 77 per cent of the total number of Independent boarding schools. In the same year, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders made up approximately 15 per cent of all boarders using Independent school boarding facilities.

Between 2014 and 2020, there was an approximate seven per cent growth in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders. In 2020, there were five schools in the sector where all the students were boarding, and all were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders. (See page 18 of *ISA Independent Boarding Schools Data Review 2011-2020*.)

2.1 Types of boarding

Boarding structures, locations, offerings and options are varied with schools striving to respond to the diverse needs of families and students.

Boarding schools operate in metropolitan, regional and remote locations. Families and students choose boarding schools both inside and beyond their own locality for a range of reasons including

access to an urban / regional lifestyle, quality of education and opportunity, family ties, affordability and ease of access.

Metropolitan schools that expose students to an urban way of life and opportunities, are often chosen because they are deliberately different from family and home community experiences. Regional schools might offer a curriculum that teaches about agriculture and regional life and are chosen because they match the interests of rural families.

Boarding schools also offer a range of discrete structures, including:

- daily, weekly, term and 'flexi' boarding. These types of boarding are receptive to the needs of both the school and families. Flexi boarding is particularly responsive as it allows families to dip in and out of boarding and change arrangements as circumstances change.
- gender-specific and co-educational boarding
- dormitories, shared and single accommodation
- extended on-site and/or off-site curricula activities
- on-school grounds and off-school grounds accommodation
- academic support and tuition
- on-site or off-site meal preparation.

“More and more families ‘shop around’ for the right school”

More and more families ‘shop around’ for the right school for their children and boarding schools are, at times, ‘competing’ with each other for students. Students themselves are also increasingly having more of a voice in decision making about school choice.²

² Independent Boarding Schools, Boarding in the Independent sector - consultation with boarding schools.

3. BENEFITS OF BOARDING

3.1 Benefits to families and boarders

While choosing to send a child to boarding school is often difficult for parents and carers, one of their main concerns is whether their child has educational opportunities and access that is equal with other students.³

Parent/s and carers choose boarding schools based on several factors that are connected to the wellbeing and educational progression of their child. A survey conducted by the AEC Group on behalf of ISA in 2022, showed the following reasons play a critical part in choosing to board children away from home.

TABLE 2: REASONS FOR ATTENDING A BOARDING SCHOOL – AEC GROUP SURVEY RESULTS

Reason for attending a boarding school	% of respondents
Access to higher quality education	71%
Access to education	42%
Access to desired / specialist subjects and co-curricular activities	33%
Ease of managing participation in extra-curricular commitments	29%
Geographical isolation of place of usual residence	33%
Family relationship / history with school or community	18%
Stability of schooling (i.e., avoid changing schools)	14%
Change in family circumstance / family disruption	7%
Family based overseas	5%
Parent / caregiver employment location / relocation	4%

Research also identifies the opportunity to access specific living arrangements (co-educational, dormitory, catering for additional needs, independent of family) or better post-school options, safety and security, peer relationships and pastoral care as further reasons families chose boarding for their children⁴.

The same AEC Group survey identified the following eight benefits of boarding school for students. They include academic and non-academic advantages.

³ Andrew J. Martin et al., "Boarding and Day School Students: A Large-Scale Multilevel Investigation of Academic Outcomes Among Students and Classrooms," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2021), <https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.608949>.

⁴ Independent Boarding Schools, Boarding in the Independent sector - consultation with boarding schools.

TABLE 3: BENEFITS OF ATTENDING A BOARDING SCHOOL – AEC GROUP BOARDING RESULTS

Benefit	% of respondents
Higher academic outcomes/increased opportunities	71%
Greater independence and self-reliance	89%
Increased opportunity for social interaction with peers	77%
Greater preparation for post school environments	65%
Improved psychological resilience	54%
Increased tolerance and compassion	52%
Reduced burden of isolated living	33%
Reduced family and community pressures and responsibilities	21%

Boarders have the advantage of living on the school site, with access to the school's facilities, additional academic support from teachers and/or tutors, a structured learning and social environment, and few barriers to consistent attendance at class. Decreased school absenteeism when compared to day students is a clear benefit of boarding.

Greater self-reliance and independence, lifelong friendships and relationship skills have also been identified both through the AEC Group survey and in the research literature⁵, as benefits of the boarding experience and as potentially contributing to positive academic outcomes.

Research shows boarders also have comparable psychological measures with day students — meaning and purpose, life satisfaction, emotional stability.⁶

Boarding students also have improved participation in co-curricular activities when compared to day students, likely a result of their co-location with the school, the range of activities available and the role of the after-school hour programs offered by boarding schools.⁷

Eighty-three per cent of respondents to the AEC Group survey somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that boarding school is a positive experience for most students.

3.2 Benefits to the Australian economy and society

The AEC Group report also shows that there are considerable economic and social benefits of boarding schools to the Australian economy and community. Independent boarding schools support a broad range of economic activities including:

- Operating activities and expenditure of Independent boarding schools themselves, including:
 - Employing staff, such as boarding house supervisors, cooking, cleaning, and laundry staff and operations and maintenance staff.

⁵ Mindy Laube, "Beyond Hogwarts: The Real-Life Benefits of Boarding," *School Blog - The Independent School Expos* (blog), May 22, 2017, <https://schoolexpo.com.au/blog/beyond-hogwarts-the-real-life-benefits-of-boarding/>.

⁶ Papworth, "Attending Boarding School: A Longitudinal Study of Its Role in Students' Academic and Non-Academic Outcomes."

⁷ Papworth.

- Generating turnover (or revenue), including revenue from student fees and charges.
 - Provision of education services (tuition and boarding) for boarding students.
 - Purchasing goods and services for operational activities, for example food and beverages for provided meals, and building and grounds maintenance.
- Capital investment by Independent boarding schools such as land acquisition, building/facility construction and other capital purchases.
 - Inducing International student expenditure through the attraction of international students.
 - Inducing visitor expenditure from visitors to international and interstate domestic borders.

Including initial and flow-on activity, at the national level, Independent boarding schools are estimated to have contributed approximately \$1.9 billion in GDP in 2019-20, representing 0.10 per cent of the total contribution to total GDP by all industries for the year. This level of activity equates to that generated by a regional centre, such as Wangaratta.

The level of employment supported by Independent boarding schools (including both initial and flow on activity) equated to approximately 0.11 per cent of national employment.⁸

TABLE 4: ESTIMATED INITIAL AND FLOW-ON CONTRIBUTION OF INDEPENDENT BOARDING SCHOOLS, 2019-20

Value of economic contribution	Gross Domestic/ State/ Territory Product (\$M)	Incomes (\$M)	Employment (FTEs)
By state and territory			
New South Wales	672.3	430.5	5178
Victoria	431.2	280.9	4051
Queensland	380.9	252.3	3428
Western Australia	255.9	172.3	1905
South Australia	79.3	55.2	870
Tasmania	17	12.9	177
Northern Territory	30	22.8	282
Australian Capital Territory	13	10.1	113
Australia	1879.4	1236.9	15998
By Independent Boarding School Typology			
Major City	1286.5	843.8	10913
Regional and Remote	495.1	331.2	4290
Indigenous	97.9	62	796
Australia	1879.4	1236.9	15998

The AEC report also examined the economic value of enhanced education outcomes. Independent boarding schools are often chosen by parents and families as they are considered to provide access to higher-quality education and higher academic outcomes.

⁸ Socio-Economic Benefits of Independent Boarding Schools, AEC Group, May 2022

Research by the OECD indicates that the enhanced educational outcomes provided by Independent schools (of which Independent boarding schools are a sub-set), through higher PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) scores (and the associated lift in labour productivity), can be linked to a contribution to growth in GDP of around \$14.3 million in 2019-20. This is the estimate of how much the enhanced educational outcomes (and productivity gains) from Independent boarding schools contribute to the national economy annually.⁹

A cost-to-benefit assessment was also conducted to identify the quantum of economic and social benefits associated with Independent boarding school activities by comparison to the cost of providing Independent boarding school services.

The costs of operating Independent boarding schools in 2020 were estimated at a total of \$869.6 million (including operating expenditure, wages and salaries of employees and capital expenditure).

The benefits of Independent boarding schools are significant, including:

- The value of supported economic activity in terms of profits to Australian education providers and supporting businesses benefiting from the initial and flow-on activities of Independent boarding schools, estimated at \$643.1 million in 2020.
- The value to employed staff of Independent boarding schools in 2020, estimated at \$124.7 million in 2020.
- The value to the economy of a higher-skilled labour force as a result of higher PISA scores, estimated at \$14.3 million per annum (or a present value of \$189.7 million over the coming 30 years).
- The value of retaining young people who would otherwise be disengaged from formal education, which has significant impacts on their life outcomes and outcomes for society as a whole, including:
 - Increased labour force participation
 - Increased employment
 - Increased wages and salaries (resulting in increased taxation revenues for government)
 - Reduced numbers of criminals and prisoners (and reduced costs to victims of crimes)
 - Reduced costs to government from increased private health insurance coverage.

The ongoing value of these benefits from Independent boarding school operations is estimated at a present value of \$39.5 million over the coming 30 years.

In total, the present value of the benefit of Independent boarding school operations in 2020 was estimated at \$997.0 million. Based on estimated costs of \$869.6 million in 2020, the cost-to-benefits ratio of Independent boarding schools was estimated at 1:1.15, suggesting a return of \$1.15 for every \$1.00 of cost.

⁹ Socio-Economic Benefits of Independent Boarding Schools, AEC Group, May 2022

4. BOARDERS

Boarding school students come with different backgrounds, interests, needs and wants. Boarding schools in the Independent sector are mostly combined (K-12) schools (75 per cent) or secondary (25 per cent) schools with only one primary boarding school. This means that the students attending boarding schools are mostly secondary students (70 per cent) with primary students making up 30 per cent. Forty-six per cent of boarding schools are single sex schools with 54 per cent being co-educational schools.

Maintaining the right balance of boarders and day students is important to preserve the status quo of the school population.¹⁰ Boarders make a significant contribution to the culture of the school and without boarders these schools would lose their distinctive characters as centres of support for students from a range of backgrounds.¹¹

There are three particular cohorts of boarders that are distinctive:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders
- boarders from regional and remote locations
- international boarders.

4.1 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders

In 2020, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders made up 15 per cent of all boarders in Independent schools. They attended metropolitan, regional and remote boarding facilities.

Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attend boarding schools for a range of reasons including a lack of secondary education options or subject choice at their local school, to gain access to financial, social, health, behavioural and/or academic support, for stability and safety and to increase social, educational and post school opportunities.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders, particularly those from remote and/or highly disadvantaged communities, have complex needs and face unique challenges that must be met by the school if the educational experience is to be successful. Isolation from family and community, unfamiliar expectations and structures, low levels of literacy and numeracy and poor physical health, can affect student mental health, wellbeing and learning when they enter school.

Poor school attendance has implications for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students whereas increased school attendance leads to improved school and employment outcomes.¹² Similarly withdrawing from school early can result in poorer self-reported health and psychological outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.¹³

Access to the safe, stable and supported educational opportunities offered by boarding schools has the potential to make an important contribution to closing the gap in educational achievement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

¹⁰ Independent Boarding Schools, Boarding in the Independent sector - consultation with boarding schools.

¹¹ Independent Boarding Schools, Boarding in the Independent sector - consultation with boarding schools.

¹² Grant Thornton, "Boarding: Investing in Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students," 2019, niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/investing-in-outcomes-analysis-2019.pdf.

¹³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Links between Education and Health," February 17, 2011, <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/lookup/4704.0Chapter365Oct+2010>.

Boarding typically offers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:¹⁴

- educational opportunities or educational choice
- consistent school attendance and improved retention
- literacy and numeracy skills
- year 12 or equivalent attainment
- improved resilience, health, wellbeing and safety
- social skills and the ability to walk in two worlds
- community capability, social cohesion, and self-determination.

Access to the safe, stable and supported educational opportunities offered by boarding schools has the potential to make an important contribution to closing the gap”

It is reported that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders enjoy their boarding experience and appreciate making new friends.¹⁵ School leaders and students also report that boarding increases career opportunities and health outcomes.¹⁶ Early evidence suggests that the smaller Indigenous boarding schools with a majority enrolment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are delivering high-quality outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.¹⁷

However, despite the potential benefits, educating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in boarding schools is complex and can be challenging for the students, their families and educators. Moving away from culture, community and family are particularly difficult experiences for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.¹⁸ Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students experience guilt about being away from family and the gap they leave in their kinship obligations and may feel that moving to boarding school puts a strain on their community, cultural and familial responsibilities.¹⁹ These issues can affect the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders.

Support to manage these pressures felt by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders in metropolitan, regional and remote schools is an important role of boarding staff.

4.2 Boarders from regional, rural and remote homes

The Australian Boarding Schools Association estimates that in 2021 there were 14,198 boarders from rural families representing 71 per cent of all boarding school students in Australia.²⁰

Some of these families have no access to education where they live, and others may have chosen to send their children to boarding schools so they have better access to subject choice, social

¹⁴ Grant Thornton, “Boarding: Investing in Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students.”

¹⁵ Martin et al., “Boarding and Day School Students.”

¹⁶ Martin et al.

¹⁷ Grant Thornton, “Boarding: Investing in Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students.”

¹⁸ Indigenous affairs correspondent Isabella Higgins, “‘Not Every Aboriginal Person Gets This Opportunity’ — and These Three Girls Had to Move Far from Home to Get It,” *ABC News*, November 7, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-08/indigenous-boarding-school-students-highs-and-lows-naidoc-week/12856108>.

¹⁹ Independent Boarding Schools, *Boarding in the Independent sector - consultation with boarding schools*.

²⁰ Australian Boarding Schools Association, “The ABSA Census,” 2021, <https://www.boarding.org.au/our-community/the-absa-census>.

relationships and educational and vocational outcomes. Students from regional and remote locations attend both metropolitan and local boarding schools, with 2,626 metro boarders and 1,807 weekly boarders in 2021 across all sectors.²¹

Independent boarding schools have developed social, pastoral and counselling support models for regional and remote students to aid wellbeing and assist students develop autonomy and independence, as well as coping skills for living away from home.

Regional boarding schools also typically focus their curriculum and co-curriculum on activities that connect with the interests, needs and vocational pathways for 'country kids'.

Many boarding students from regional, rural, and remote areas view the boarding houses as a special location of support²² particularly during crises and times of considerable change as was evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic for those regional students who were not able to return home.

4.3 International boarders

Australia is the third most popular country in which to study²³ and education is Australia's fourth largest export.²⁴ However due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent changes to entry requirements between 2019 and 2020, Australia experienced a significant reduction in the number of overseas students onshore.²⁵ This loss is heavily weighted to the tertiary sector.

In Independent schools, ISA estimates that overseas boarders make up 0.5 per cent of the total number of boarders in the Independent school sector and they make a significant contribution to both the boarding culture in schools and the global engagement of the Independent school sector.

In line with the education sector as a whole, border closures have negatively impacted on the enrolment of international students with a 13 per cent decline in overseas boarder numbers since 2019.

Access to a globally renowned education, student pathways to further study and a politically stable, safe, supportive, welcoming multicultural society are all reasons overseas families choose to send their children to an Independent boarding school in Australia.

Boarding schools faced particular challenges in supporting overseas students during the pandemic, including managing overseas students who were onshore and unable to return home for an extended duration. Boarding schools managed this by encouraging regular communication with family and friends, creating local peer networks, organising extensive holiday programs and activities, and increasing social and pastoral support. No less challenging was providing remote learning and continual engagement with overseas students who were unable to participate in face-to-face learning for extended periods.

²¹ Australian Boarding Schools Association.

²² A. J. MacDonald, Michael John Corbett, and V. Cruickshank, "Providing Pastoral Care to Rural Students in Metropolitan Boarding Schools," in *AARE Conference Papers 2017*, 2017, <http://www.aareconference.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/AARE-2017-Conference-Program12.pdf>.

²³ International Student, "Growing Destination," accessed February 10, 2022, https://www.internationalstudent.com/study_australia/why_study_australia/growing-destination/.

²⁴ Department of Education, "Research Snapshot," December 2019, <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/Research-Snapshots/Documents/Education%20infographic%20Australia%202018%E2%80%9319.pdf>.

²⁵ Hazel Ferguson and Harriet Spinks, "Overseas Students in Australian Higher Education: A Quick Guide," accessed April 1, 2022, https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp2021/Quick_Guides/OverseasStudents.

5. RESOURCING BOARDING SCHOOLS

All Independent schools receive their income from a combination of government funding, parent fees, donations, investments and borrowing. The majority of their government funding comes from the Australian Government. The amount of funding available is different for each school depending on the school's size and characteristics, student attributes, parents' capacity to contribute and school fees and donations.

Australian Government recurrent funding is only provided for the purposes of supporting the recurrent costs of the school and does not cover costs associated with boarding.

In the majority of boarding schools, every aspect of the boarding experience, from capital works and infrastructure maintenance to extra tuition, to meals, is funded by the families of the boarders. However, there are a range of supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students available, such as ABSTUDY, and some government and privately funded scholarships. Governments also provide some limited financial assistance to boarding schools, general those serving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

5.1 The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Study Assistance Scheme

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Study Assistance Scheme (ABSTUDY) is an Australian Government payment to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in their studies. ABSTUDY is a payment directed to eligible parents or carers to assist in the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The ABSTUDY School Fees Allowance (boarding) payment depends on the school fee amount. Parents and carers can also use ABSTUDY to independently pay for the costs associated with boarding such as school fees. There are two parts to the allowance:

- An annual part that is not income tested, up to \$8,856
- An annual part that is income tested, up to \$2,540
- Some ABSTUDY payments and allowances can be directed to the boarding school or hostel.²⁶

When compared to the cost of boarding provision in government facilities, the current ABSTUDY payments that are directed to the boarding school only covers part of the cost of boarding at an Indigenous boarding school, leaving a significant funding gap.²⁷

Consequently, Independent boarding schools with a majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolment are experiencing increasing financial pressures.²⁸ In 2017, the median average revenue through ABSTUDY and cost per boarder for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding schools was approximately \$18,700 and \$25,000 respectively—a shortfall of about \$6,300 per boarder.²⁹

²⁶ Department of Social Services, "ABSTUDY Policy Manual," February 2022, <https://guides.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2022-03/401-february-2022-abstudy.pdf#page=216&zoom=100,72,123>.

²⁷ Independent Schools Council of Australia, "2020-2021 Pre-Budget Submission: Urgent Needs for Additional Resourcing for Indigenous Boarding Schools," 2020, https://isa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/115786_INDEPENDENT_SCHOOLS_COUNCIL_OF_AUSTRALIA.pdf.

²⁸ Northern Territory Government, Department of Education, "Non-Government Indigenous Boarding Schools," 2016, <https://education.nt.gov.au/reviews-and-consultations/non-government-indigenous-boarding-schools>.

²⁹ Grant Thornton, "Boarding: Investing in Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students."

In addition, considerable criticism exists in relation to the administrative burden associated with ABSTUDY with calls to simplify ABSTUDY to reduce the cost and pressure on boarding schools of managing paperwork.³⁰

Indigenous boarding schools, which have mainly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments, are particularly reliant on ABSTUDY, without which, the viability of some Indigenous boarding providers would be affected.³¹ The fact that payment does not cover the full costs of boarding students means that schools struggle to meet the full costs of the provision of boarding.

5.2 Scholarships

A wide range of scholarship programs exist primarily for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The conditions, administrative and accountability requirements, financial value and support associated with these scholarships vary widely. Scholarships can be funded by private philanthropists, charities or governments.

The Australian Indigenous Education Foundation³² is a database of individual school scholarships for eligible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from over twenty schools. Similarly, the Yalari Rosemary Bishop Indigenous Education Scholarship includes full boarding and tuition costs at one of Yalari's schools.³³ These private scholarships are offered to students who are willing to engage fully in their education.

Additional funding of \$10.9 million was announced in the 2022-23 Federal Budget for the Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program to assist up to 200 families from low-socioeconomic status (SES) communities with the cost of boarding school fees.

5.3 Government funding

Both the Australian Government and some state governments have, at different times, provided funding support for boarding schools. In recent years, these have been one-off short-term funding injections and while welcome, they do not address systemic funding issues.

For example - in the 2021-22 Federal Budget, the Australian Government announced \$16.6 million for the Indigenous Boarding Schools Grants program. This program is designed to assist Indigenous boarding schools address issues created by the COVID-19 pandemic and also recognised the funding shortfall for Indigenous boarding students. This program has been extended for another year in the 2022-23 Federal Budget.

In addition to these school-based measures the Assistance for Isolated Children Allowance (AIC) is an on-going Australian Government funding program which provides payments for parents and carers of children who are unable to go to a local government school because of geographical isolation, disability, or special needs.³⁴ The AIC boarding allowance is an allowance paid to families to cover boarding charges plus a payment to cover items like toiletries.

³⁰ Independent Boarding Schools, "Boarding in the Independent Sector - Consultation with Boarding Schools."

³¹ Grant Thornton, "Boarding: Investing in Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students."

³² "Scholarships - Australian Indigenous Education Foundation," accessed May 12, 2022, <http://www.aief.com.au/scholarships/>.

³³ "Yalari Scholarships," Yalari, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://www.yalari.org/scholarships/>.

³⁴ "Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme - Services Australia," accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/assistance-for-isolated-children-scheme>.

In 2022, the total potential rate provides \$11,396 per child per year towards boarding. Boarding costs affect the amount of Additional Boarding Allowance a family is eligible for and if boarding fees are \$8,856 or greater, families are only eligible for the Basic Boarding Allowance. The Additional Boarding Allowance is means tested. AIC also provides other payments to families to support other educational options such as distance education, the second home allowance and a pensioner education supplement.

Some state governments provide additional funding that recognises the costs of boarding. In Queensland, the Non-State Schools Recurrent Grant for eligible non-government schools recognises recipients of boarding fee concessions based on student needs. There is also the Living Away from Home Allowances Scheme that supports families whose children need to live away from home. The scheme provides financial support for tuition, travel and students with disability.

In the Northern Territory, the NT Government funds boarding schools through the Isolated Student Education Allowance (ISEA) and a supplementary boarding funding. The ISEA is for supervised educational opportunities including homework supervision and recreational and social development. It is paid direct to boarding facilities but is not able to be used to offset the cost of boarding accommodation. The supplementary boarding funding is for non-government boarding schools to meet some of the costs associated with boarding eligible Aboriginal students who are residents of the Northern Territory and are receiving ABSTUDY or the boarding allowance under the AIC.

5.4 Fee income

Boarding schools rely almost entirely on income from fees. The boarding fees charged by Independent boarding schools differ greatly depending on the type of school and the families and students that they enrol. In 2019, most boarding schools (53 boarding schools) charged an average boarding fee of \$20,000 to \$25,000 per boarder with the fee income range between \$2,200 to more than \$40,000. In many Indigenous boarding schools, ABSTUDY is the only fee income that the school receives.

TABLE 5: FEE RANGE OF BOARDING SCHOOLS AND NUMBER OF BOARDING FACILITIES

	No. of Independent boarding schools	No of boarders	No which are Indigenous boarding schools	No of boarders at Indigenous boarding schools
Under \$5K	2	64	0	0
\$5k to \$10k	8	815	3	309
\$10k to \$15k	19	1,669	3	77
\$15k to \$20k	39	4,601	1	63
\$20k to \$25k	53	4,819	2	124
\$25k to \$30k	13	1,441	0	0
\$30k to \$35k	4	188	0	0
Over \$35k	3	826	0	0
No fee income reported	14	142	1	31
TOTAL	155	14,565	10	604

Most boarding schools (69 per cent) did not keep separate financial accounts for their boarding facility in 2019. This limits the ability to assess the financial health of many boarding facilities.

In 2019, 30 per cent of boarding schools and/or the boarding facilities in a school (42 boarding schools) ran at a loss in that year with 55 per cent of these boarding schools being in regional areas. However, while these schools may run at a loss in any single year, they would be relying on savings and other assets to support their on-going operations.

Independent boarding schools also make decisions to provide financial relief for at-risk families and families impacted by natural disasters through scholarships, fee waivers and resource support.

6. CHALLENGES

Independent boarding schools have identified a range of challenges for the sector. All are significantly impacted by funding and impact boarding schools differently depending on the student cohort and type of facility

- Workforce
- Student support
- Infrastructure costs
- Regional and remote boarding

6.1 Workforce

Looking after boarding students is a profession of care and boarding schools depend on employing sufficient trained, experienced and committed staff, yet workforce attraction, training and retention are the most critical of the challenges identified by boarding school leaders. In 2021, there were 3,768 boarding staff across Australia.³⁵

Decisions about the number, type, qualifications, experience and remuneration levels of the boarding school workforce are heavily tied to funding and staff availability.

Independent schools identify the following as significant and ongoing workforce challenges:

- Attracting and recruiting sufficient high-quality staff who are willing to make a commitment to the boarding school and see it as a long-term career option. Boarding schools reported that attracting qualified staff can be a challenge as the remuneration for boarding staff can be low. This in turn leads to high turnover which makes it difficult for schools to encourage staff to improve their qualifications and training. For these reasons, many boarding providers employ university students and other unqualified staff for low-level positions, to staff the boarding programs. These staff are often attracted to the work by a desire to work with young people. Many university students use this employment as a temporary opportunity while they are studying.³⁶
- Identifying, funding and engaging staff in appropriate professional learning to increase skills in relation to duty of care responsibilities. In particular, leaders identify challenges in training staff to: respond to students in crisis and/or with mental health/wellbeing needs; develop the cultural competency to support international students and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; and to care for students with a disability or other additional needs.

Building ongoing professional learning, certificate courses and qualifications into the professional expectations of boarding staff, is highly recommended by Independent boarding schools and an important contributor to staff attraction and retention.³⁷ Professional learning must be timely and relevant to the diverse workings of boarding schools. Core topics for professional development include:³⁸

³⁵ Australian Boarding Schools Association, "The ABSA Census."

³⁶ Independent Boarding Schools, Boarding in the Independent sector - consultation with boarding schools.

³⁷ Independent Boarding Schools.

³⁸ Australian Boarding Schools Association, "Welcome to ABSA," 2021, <https://www.boarding.org.au/about-us/welcome-to-absa>.

- Behaviour management
 - Preventing and dealing with addiction
 - Duty of care
 - Mental health
 - Boarders with special needs
 - Cultural competency
 - Managing social media.
- Maintaining and funding appropriate student to staff ratios to cater for boarders with disability³⁹ and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders⁴⁰ including employing sufficient supervisors, as well as tutors and specialists, when no additional funding is available.
- Attracting high calibre heads of boarding and managing the workload of those staff who often have a teaching load in the school in addition to their boarding leadership role. The significant gap in salary between male and female heads of boarding⁴¹ as well as between schools, adds to the challenge of attraction and retention for some smaller schools.
- Managing staff wellbeing by prioritising quality relationships, including peer relationships and enhancing training opportunities to support students and manage conflict and behaviour difficulties. Boarding schools had a particularly challenging time during COVID-19 supporting students through lockdowns and periods of mandatory isolation due to infection. Schools had to balance managing health mandates as well as staffing requirements. Research commissioned by ISA shows that schools can overcome these barriers if they have access to the right resources for their school's particular needs and the capacity to invest and sustain their commitment.⁴²

6.2 Student Support

The fundamental role of the boarding schools is to provide continuity of care and nurture the intellectual, physical, social and emotional wellbeing and growth of boarders, ensuring they feel safe at all times. A rich boarding experience provides boarders with scheduled rest, exercise, study, recreation and opportunities for holistic development, and builds the dispositions, knowledge and skills boarders need to be successful and participating members of society.

This is a hugely complex task with the needs, wants and interests of individual boarders varying significantly. The cost and staff expertise required to provide 24-hour support to each student is proving a serious and increasingly critical financial and workforce challenge for all boarding schools.

In particular, challenges are experienced in the following areas:

- *Student wellbeing and mental health*: Generalised anxiety, self-harm, and suicidal ideation are increasing in young Australians overall and can be more pronounced in the boarding context due to homesickness, distance from family and students' proximity to peers including shared quarters and direct and often close relationships.⁴³ The reason for increased mental health issues in boarding schools has been labelled by Independent boarding school leaders as the 'contagion

³⁹ Independent Boarding Schools, Boarding in the Independent sector - consultation with boarding schools.

⁴⁰ House of Representatives, "The Power of Education: From Surviving to Thriving Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students, Dated December," 2017, <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2826003547>.

⁴¹ Independent Boarding Schools, Boarding in the Independent sector - consultation with boarding schools.

⁴² Kevin Reunions and Donna Cross, "Student and Staff Wellbeing and Mental Health" (Independent Schools Australia, May 2022).

⁴³ Independent Boarding Schools, Boarding in the Independent sector - consultation with boarding schools.

impact'.⁴⁴ with students more susceptible to be influenced by the experiences and behaviours of their peers. Leaders observe this 'contagion' has a lasting impact on individual and group mental health and wellbeing.

- *The online world:* Managing social media, virtual content and screen time is a challenge for students and boarding staff. Access to inappropriate material and cyber bullying must be mitigated. At some schools there is a strict policy of 'no devices after dinner'.as one response to managing this challenge.
- *Students with a disability:* In schools, students with disability attract an additional loading under the Schooling Resource Standard to provide adjustments in the school environment. There is no similar funding for boarding schools, and any additional costs incurred to change infrastructure, modify activities, provide specialist staff or otherwise support students, are fully borne by the school. Some boarders with disability are eligible for the National Disability Insurance Scheme at home to assist families in making adjustments and accessing additional supports.

However, despite students with disability spending a significant portion of their time at the boarding facility, the school is not eligible for a government payment or allowance.⁴⁵ The diverse needs of boarders with disability means there is a requirement for ongoing specialised staff training, which is also not currently supported by government funding.

- *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders:* Meeting the unique social, education and cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is an ongoing challenge. The additional supports needed for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to have a successful boarding experience means there is an increased need of cultural competency for all staff developed through specialised training, which is an additional and unfunded cost.

Cultural events and experiences and the employment of staff from the community also benefit the wellbeing and school engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.^{46 47} Other supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders include:⁴⁸

- Literacy and numeracy support
- Vocational training
- Communication facilities to connect with family and community
- Buddy system with peers
- Providing accommodation and/or a travel allowance for visiting family
- First language recognition
- Transition support to assist with retention
- Cross-cultural skills associated with living in a metropolitan and/or regional city area
- Health services
- Learning boarding expectations such as living in a group situation
- Social, independent living and financial training.

⁴⁴ Independent Boarding Schools, Boarding in the Independent sector - consultation with boarding schools.

⁴⁵ Independent Boarding Schools, Boarding in the Independent sector - consultation with boarding schools.

⁴⁶ Mary-Anne Macdonald et al., "A 'Better' Education: An Examination of the Utility of Boarding School for Indigenous Secondary Students in Western Australia," *Australian Journal of Education* 62, no. 2 (August 1, 2018): 192–216, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944118776762>.

⁴⁷ Independent Boarding Schools, Boarding in the Independent sector - consultation with boarding schools.

⁴⁸ Independent Schools Council of Australia, "2020-2021 Pre-Budget Submission: Urgent Needs for Additional Resourcing for Indigenous Boarding Schools."

All are complex to organise, sustain and fund.

- Meeting student and family expectations: 'Expectation inflation' is a growing phenomenon with students and families seeking more in terms of well-being support than they have previously. Recent research from McCrindle states that "In the last 5 years, almost half of parents (48%) have increased their expectations of their child's school to support wellbeing. More than one in four (27%) have significantly or somewhat increased their expectations."⁴⁹ In boarding schools this is expressed as expectations for improved food options, greater choice of extra-curricular activities, more personalised academic and wellbeing supports and access to ensuite bathroom and private accommodation

6.3 Infrastructure costs

New building works, upgrading, maintaining and refreshing boarding infrastructure and the provision of equipment, information technology and furniture is an ongoing challenge. There is a need for better infrastructure to ensure safety and security and layout to enable and foster opportunities for connection.

Independent school leaders identify changed family expectations for lower ratios of boarders to ensuites, co-curricular facilities and an improved general boarding environment; general maintenance requirements and the need for high levels of safety and protection as exacerbating the long-held challenge of providing comfortable, contemporary accommodation for boarders.⁵⁰

Where there is competition for students between boarding schools, facilities can play a deciding role in families' choice. Schools are expected to offer the best possible infrastructure and opportunities to potential students. This is increasingly difficult and expensive.

Envisaging and planning the infrastructure that will be required in boarding in 15 years' time is also challenging. Due to COVID-19 there are now expectations on ventilation, social distancing, and enhanced cleaning for the foreseeable future in boarding schools.⁵¹

6.4 Regional and remote boarding

For many families, regional and remote boarding provides the only practical educational option, yet repeatedly, reports have shown regional boarding schools are chronically underfunded, particularly Indigenous boarding schools.⁵²

The lack of boarding-specific recurrent funding is particularly felt by regional and remote boarding schools. The cost of providing education and boarding including transport, curriculum, staffing and technology is high in regional and remote areas due to distance from central services. Staff shortages are also a constant challenge.

To cover the costs of goods, transport, technology and connections to family and culture, provide incentives to attract and retain a quality workforce and accumulate capital to improve the living and

⁴⁹ McCrindle, Top 5 Education Trends, <https://mccrindle.com.au/insights/blog/top-5-education-trends/>

⁵⁰ Independent Boarding Schools, Boarding in the Independent sector - consultation with boarding schools.

⁵¹ Health and Safety Directorate, "Boarding Schools" (NSW Department of Education, February 7, 2022), <https://education.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/advice-for-families/boarding-schools0.html>; Health and Safety Directorate, "Advice for Families" (NSW Department of Education, March 24, 2022), <https://education.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/advice-for-families.html>.

⁵² Grant Thornton, "Boarding: Investing in Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students" ; Northern Territory Government, Department of Education, "Non-Government Indigenous Boarding Schools."

learning environment, a number of regional boarding schools cross subsidise boarding through fee income. This is unsustainable.

These financial concerns are often exacerbated by the economic hardship faced by some families as a consequence of unpredictable income from agriculture and fluctuating livestock and produce market prices.⁵³ In the instance of an adverse natural event, many boarding schools initially bear the costs of supporting families.⁵⁴ One example of this in recent years is the provision of fee remission and relief provided by Queensland schools for drought relief.

⁵³ Independent Schools Council of Australia, "Inquiry into the Education of Students in Remote and Complex Environments," 2020, <https://isa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ISCA-submission-Inquiry-into-the-education-of-students-in-remote-and-complex-environments.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Independent Boarding Schools, Boarding in the Independent sector - consultation with boarding schools.

7. OPPORTUNITIES

Independent boarding schools make a significant contribution to providing educational and care choices and opportunities for many students and despite all the challenges outlined above, the sector anticipates boarding school enrolments will recover post pandemic.

The challenges Independent boarding school leaders and parents have identified, if addressed, could significantly assist boarding schools to continue to thrive. There are real opportunities to take action to respond these challenges.

Opportunity 1: Review Australian Government policies and funding structures to direct resources to boarding schools to support disadvantaged students, improve infrastructure and engage a skilled workforce

Australian Government funding policy and mechanisms to support disadvantaged students to access a quality education do not extend to the boarding facility where students spend much of their time. The opportunity exists to re-examine recurrent needs-based funding and direct additional funding to boarding schools to enable them to maintain the high level of care they currently provide and go some way to offering stability for the sector to develop and enhance their programs. Additional funding would also mean:

- better support for select student groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students with disability. Working with the government to enable boarding schools to access National Disability Insurance Scheme funding for the time that students reside with them would fill a gap in providing for high-needs boarders
- improved and better maintained infrastructure
- higher calibre staff working under better conditions.

Opportunity 2: Reintroduce Fringe Benefit Tax benefits for Independent schools to support workforce attraction and retention

Independent boarding schools are no longer exempt from Fringe Benefits Tax on staff meals and accommodation.⁵⁵ The Fringe Benefits Tax exception made it possible to entice and retain staff with attractive entitlements. A new funding model that enabled a Fringe Benefits Tax exemption might result in a more sustainable staffing model for boarding schools and increase their capacity to attract and retain experienced staff.

Opportunity 3: Introduce incentives to improve the qualifications and skills of the boarding workforce

High staff turnover, and the lack of trained staff are issues that continue to challenge Independent boarding schools. Incentives to build the expertise and qualifications of staff could include:

- training subsidies for staff, particularly in mental health first aid, supporting students with disability and cultural competence
- opportunities for collaboration with other boarding schools overseas, boarding staff exchange programs (domestic and international).

⁵⁵ Australian Taxation Office, "Board Fringe Benefits," accessed February 10, 2022, [https://www.ato.gov.au/general/fringe-benefits-tax-\(fbt\)/types-of-fringe-benefits/board-fringe-benefits/](https://www.ato.gov.au/general/fringe-benefits-tax-(fbt)/types-of-fringe-benefits/board-fringe-benefits/).

— pay scales which recognise training and qualifications.

Opportunity 4: Increase the number of scholarships available to regional, rural and remote students, disadvantaged groups and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to improve access to boarding

Scholarships funded through private and public sources play a significant role in supporting many students to access boarding schools. A campaign to attract and support scholarship providers and promote and simplify access to scholarships may enable disadvantaged groups greater access to boarding.

Opportunity 5: Consider updating the Australian Boarding Standard to define and guide best practices in boarding care and delivery

The articulation of clear standards and guidelines is an important way of defining and supporting best practices in boarding care and delivery.

The current *Australian Boarding Standard* was published in 2015. Involving Independent boarding school leaders, parents, staff and students in redeveloping national standards to ensure they are flexible, contemporary, responsive and guide the provision of boarding, would be welcomed by many Independent boarding schools. Focusing on both operational and regulatory standards and drawing on existing legislation would support this renewal.

8. CONCLUSION

Boarding schools have long supported diverse groups of boarders and provided choice, and opportunity for many families, including those who do not have access to local education.

Independent boarding schools continue to offer quality care despite the financial and workforce challenges in the sector. In times of significant change, boarding schools have shown resilience and the ability to respond to pressure.

The benefits and challenges outlined in this paper, including responsiveness to diverse student needs, a focus on student welfare, and funding reform, provide the opportunities for action that will ensure that the Independent school sector can continue to provide an essential boarding service,