



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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## RESOURCE STANDARDS

The Commonwealth Schools Commission published, in April this year, *Commonwealth Standards for Australian Schools*, in which the Commission establishes a range of recurrent resource standards which it judges to be desirable for Australian schools.

In the first part of the report the Commission addressed the principles by which such standards were established as well as the educational context and objectives of Australian schooling, and considered the factors affecting the development of these objectives, the changes in society and education.

In the second part of the report, Basic Recurrent Resource Standards for Australian Schools, recommendations are made for school organisation, school size, class size and student groupings, staffing and other resources.

The third part of the report highlights the special needs of particular schools, with the equality, equity and differential resource needs of these schools being considered.

Special concern is expressed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It is appropriate that *The Aboriginal Child at School* reproduce in full the section of the report that focussed specifically on the educational needs of our Aboriginal students:-

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### "ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS

11.16 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a unique and special place in Australian society as the first inhabitants of the continent. (Although Torres Strait Islander people are culturally different from the Aboriginal people, in terms of their needs and educational resources there are broad similarities. In this section, the term 'Aboriginal' is used to refer to both the Aboriginal and the Torres Strait Islander people). This distinction has not been matched over time either in terms of educational provisions for Aboriginal children or in terms of student achievement. Schools have generally tended to adopt a 'deficit' model in respect to Aboriginal students based on an assumption that Aboriginal people will or should assimilate into the European culture. As a consequence, until recent years, their rightful aspirations and cultural and linguistic needs have been largely ignored. There have, however, been notable achievements in Aboriginal education

"in recent years and many schools are striving to develop appropriate forms of education for the varying needs of Aboriginal students.

11.17 *Qualitative Needs:* Although educational policies based on concepts of equity and equality of opportunity require above-average provision to be made for groups in special need, Aboriginal needs must be considered also in terms of form and approach. The culture of many Aboriginal people requires a different pedagogy, particular forms of teacher preparation, properly researched curricula and materials, and facilities which match cultural and geographical requirements. A twelve year-old living in a traditional community will be highly skilled educationally in terms of his or her local cultural and environmental context. However, this child, as well as Aboriginal students in other cultural contexts, may seek to acquire knowledge and skills in a more European sense and here too educational provisions should be closely attuned to Aboriginal culture and circumstances.

11.18 *Diversity of Organisational Patterns:* The foregoing suggests that educational responses to the needs of Aboriginal people will vary considerably. There are major cultural differences within the Aboriginal population epitomised by the 'urban dispersed' Aboriginal people who live in ways not easily distinguished from those of fellow urban Australians and, at the other end of the spectrum, traditionally oriented communities living according to traditional patterns. The desire by Aboriginal people to strengthen or re-establish their cultural roots may be seen in the 'homeland' movement and in an emerging trend to establish Aboriginal community schools. Both developments are expressions of the desire by Aboriginal people to control their own lives and to live within Aboriginal cultural circumstances. The Aboriginal community school, once fully developed, may act as a model (albeit one with considerable variety) of good practice in terms of Aboriginal education. Already those schools which exist in some States and the Territories are highlighting Aboriginal governance, linguistic and cultural needs, a strong community presence in the school and a valuing of well trained, culturally-sensitive European teachers. Resource provisions in these schools will inevitably be different from those required in a regular school and the financial structure of the school will be affected by the very limited capacity of many such communities to contribute to its operation.

11.19 *Distribution of Aboriginal Students:* Most Aboriginal children attend government or Catholic schools. In 1981 there were just over 66,412 Aboriginal students aged 5-19 years of age. Of this number New South Wales had 23 per cent and Queensland had 28 per cent.

"Western Australia had approximately 20 per cent and the Northern Territory just over 14 per cent. In addition to cultural and life-style differences, the distribution of Aboriginal people in Australia is very uneven. Moreover, the Aboriginal population is young (some 42 per cent of the population is aged 5-19 years, compared with around 27 per cent in the total population) and it is being rapidly urbanised (over 60 per cent live in urban areas).

11.20 There are relatively large numbers of schools in the States with Aboriginal enrolments. Overwhelmingly, the schools enrolling Aboriginal students have fewer than 100 students in total. These schools are usually small government schools located in rural areas. Schools with a majority of Aboriginal students are found particularly in Queensland (over 30), the Northern Territory (over 70) and Western Australia (over 50). A number of Independent Aboriginal Community Schools have been established in North-West Western Australia and one has recently received registration in the Northern Territory. These schools in effect have total Aboriginal enrolments.

11.21 *Aspirations and Objectives:* Aboriginal demand for education, including secondary education, is increasing. The strength of this increase is reflected largely in the lower secondary school rather than in Years 11 and 12, where, in 1979, 8 per cent of Aboriginal students were enrolled in contrast to 20.6 per cent of all students enrolled. While access to mainstream education remains a problem, the major concerns centre upon retention and achievement. The responsibility of schools in relation to Aboriginal scholastic achievement must be emphasised. This failure of schools to retain Aboriginal students may be attributed in part to experiences and lack of development at the primary level. In some situations where Aboriginal students comprise a very small proportion of the school enrolment, the difficulties facing teachers in making appropriate responses to these and other students are recognised, even where they are sensitive to such needs. When these issues are placed against the manifest desire of Aboriginal people for more and better educational provisions, the following issue stands out. For most Aboriginal people education must have a dual function. It must reinforce and preserve the kinship, language and other values which are at the root of Aboriginal culture and it should offer access to mainstream Australian society. For many Aboriginal children, success in the latter depends upon how the school responds to the former. Bilingual and bicultural approaches may be essential techniques for schools to employ for many Aboriginal students.

11.22 *Aboriginal Students of Non-English Speaking Background:* Numbers of Aboriginal students are of non-English speaking background. At present, ESL/EFL provision for these students is seriously

"inadequate. Desirable levels of resource provision for Aboriginal children of non-English speaking background are similar to those set out in relation to children of migrant background. In providing an optimum level of resources in schools where Aboriginal students are enrolled, the proportion of these specialist teachers should not reach such a level where it impedes the contribution and initiative of the Aboriginal community and the Aboriginal teaching personnel. Moreover, teachers should ideally have a command of the first language of the students. Apart from signalling respect for and interest in the Aboriginal language, this skill can help the non-Aboriginal teacher communicate with Aboriginal children directly and explain concepts. It can also assist greatly in the process of teacher training. This can be difficult to achieve when teacher turnover in Aboriginal schools is high and a large number of language groups are present.

11.23 *Health:* Clearly, the quality of educational provision for Aboriginal students goes beyond linguistic requirements. Health services are essential if Aboriginal children are to be maximally receptive to what the school can offer. A number of conditions occur more frequently in some Aboriginal communities than among the non-Aboriginal population, notably eye and ear infections, and these conditions affect the outcomes of schooling for Aboriginal children. Not only is there a need for regular health care provision in schools but also for appropriate health education programs.

11.24 *Professional Development:* Desirable teacher qualifications in respect of language teaching have been outlined. For the generalist teacher of Aboriginal children an appreciation of language and culture is equally important. It is also important that these teachers are thoroughly trained in a pedagogy which acknowledges Aboriginal learning styles and culture.

11.25 *Curriculum Development:* Considerable efforts are being made in the field of curriculum development and materials production for Aboriginal students. Too often in the past materials have been produced which were modifications of those used with non-Aboriginal children. At the school level, substantial time allowances should be provided to assist teachers to prepare materials in collaboration with Aboriginal people and communities and to plan and implement out-of-classroom activities.

11.26 *Incentives for Teachers:* Appropriate facilities are an important consideration in the acquisition and retention of good teachers for schools enrolling Aboriginal students, particularly those in isolated areas. Housing appropriate to the climatic conditions should be provided for each teacher. Isolation allowances

"should also be paid to bring the cost of living into comparison with capital city rates. It should be acknowledged, however, that a variety of incentives have been used in the past to attract and hold teachers to remote settlements with limited success.

11.27 *Recommended Resources:* There is a substantial number of variables to be considered when assessing additional recurrent resource provision for schools enrolling Aboriginal students. These variables include the size of the school and whether it has access to systemic resources, the proportion of Aboriginal students enrolled, the cultural background of the students and whether the school is providing a conventional curriculum or one fundamentally modified to accommodate the nature of the students. However, specific categories of need can be identified for all schools enrolling Aboriginal students.

11.28 The additional resource needs of schools enrolling Aboriginal students are summarised below. These are in addition to the basic standards outlined in Part II.

- (i) Substantial increases in the rates of provision of teachers to enable reduction in class sizes, additional time allowance for policy development, lesson planning and professional development activities. Provision should also be made for teachers and support staff to be prepared for bilingual/bicultural teaching and ESL/EFL language maintenance provisions.
- (ii) Further specialist teachers, up to one for every 80 Aboriginal students enrolled, should be provided, particularly in such areas as language reproduction and literacy.
- (iii) Additional instructional ancillary staff should be provided to enable Aboriginal teaching assistants and, where appropriate, materials production aides to be appointed.
- (iv) Further support services should be provided through a nursing sister or medical aide for every ten or so schools enrolling Aboriginal students. Community liaison officers and other school counsellors should also be available in schools enrolling substantial numbers of Aboriginal students.

"(v) Aboriginal students should also have access to additional equipment and materials including, where appropriate, vehicle maintenance equipment, computing and printing facilities. A further increase in the allowance for discretionary cash grants is also warranted."

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One of the aims of the report is that it should serve as a model of the actual resources schools need to provide "schooling experiences of high quality" (p.3). We have been able to include only a small section of the report in this issue of *The Aboriginal Child at School*. Copies of *Commonwealth Standards for Australian Schools* and *Funding Policies for Australian Schools* may be obtained from the Commonwealth Schools Commission, Canberra.

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**BOOKS :**

*Return to the Islands: the story of Aborigines and the tradition of mutton birding.* Education Department of Tasmania, Hobart, 1984. ISBN: 7246 0617 3. Price: Free to Tasmanian schools.

This book is part of the series *Aborigines in Tasmania*, and is accompanied by a teachers' guide. An additional book, *Teaching and Learning about Aborigines in Tasmania* is an essential part of the series.

*The Aboriginal People of Tasmania.* Clark, Julia. Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, 1983. ISBN: 7246 1165 7. Price: \$9.95.

A study of traditional culture from an Aboriginal point of view, this book complements the series *Aborigines in Tasmania*.

Reviews of both the above books will appear in Vol.12 No 4, of *The Aboriginal Child at School*.

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