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Chair  
Education and Health Standing Committee  
Parliament House  
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Dear Ms Freeman

Thank you for your letter dated 29 June 2017, sent on behalf of the Education and Standing Committee regarding the release of the Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC) Report – *Educate Australia Fair? Education Inequality in Australia*.

I provide the following comments regarding the BCEC report, its conclusions and findings:

*Educate Australia Fair? Education Inequality in Australia* draws together the data and understandings from major collections undertaken across pre-school, primary, secondary and higher education. It 'assesses the degree to which Australians have equal opportunity through education according to where they live and other key demographic factors'. It provides an assessment of social mobility in Australia and introduces a new BCEC Educational Disadvantage Index that maps local areas of relative advantage and disadvantage, allowing detailed comparisons of those areas on a range of key indicators relating to access, performance and resourcing.

The impacts of social disadvantage are of no surprise to those familiar with the key data sources being referenced. In bringing these data sources together and providing key indicators from across an educational life cause the substantial divide between the most and least disadvantaged areas across Australia. This presents a confronting reminder of the level of inequality that exists. Despite examples of areas of improvement and our continued efforts to address this divide it is clear that more needs to be done.

The report concludes that:

- Many young children will not receive a 'fair go' in accessing educational opportunities as a consequence of family background, demographic characteristics and geography.
- There is a disturbing level of inequality relating to various aspects of educational disadvantage.
- Funding is largely being distributed relative to need but the links to improvements in outcomes are not clear.
- There is a need for greater emphasis on the early years, the transition from primary to secondary school and targeted programs for a number of equity groups.
- Educational reform needs to go beyond funding in order to address the complex barriers that impede the most vulnerable children. These broad conclusions and many of the specific findings about Western Australia are predictable. However, several findings and claims, particularly in relation to early childhood education, are contestable. For example, it is claimed that children living in remote areas of Western Australia have less access to pre-school, whereas every four year old is entitled to enrol in Kindergarten at a school where programs are delivered by qualified teachers in accordance with the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standard.

The Commonwealth's most recent assessment of Western Australia's performance under the National Partnership on Universal Access found that in 2016, 100% of Western Australian four year olds enrolled in Kindergarten and 95.5% had access to programs delivered for 15 hours or more per week. This is at odds with the report's finding that only 40% of children in the most disadvantaged areas in Western Australia are attending pre-school for 15 hours or more on average, compared to 70% nationally. It is also at odds with the report's conclusion that Western Australia has the third lowest equity ratio in Australia for pre-school enrolment, especially as Kindergarten enrolment at public schools (with almost 74% of the market) is free of compulsory charges.

The Department is concerned with the report's reliance on data sourced from the National Early Childhood Education and Care Collection and reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in Catalogue Number 4240.0 Preschool Education, Australia, 2016. The use of the ABS Preschool Education data, particularly attendance, is highly problematic in terms of comparability across Australia, in determining whether students are accessing 15 plus hours of pre-school per week and in reporting a shortfall between enrolment and attendance. Pre-school attendance data are misunderstood and misinterpreted throughout the report resulting in erroneous conclusions being drawn.

Western Australia has consistently exceeded Universal Access performance targets for quality pre-school provision since 2010, and we remain committed to maintaining this level of provision for all children in the year before full-time school. In addition to Western Australia's ongoing commitment to maintain universal access to high quality early childhood education for all children, the Department of Education has implemented several initiatives to enhance the engagement of disadvantaged children in early childhood education, including:

- *KindiLink:*  
A play-and-learn initiative for three year old Aboriginal children who attend with a parent/carer at 37 selected public schools that have a high number and proportion of Aboriginal enrolments. It is running as a pilot 2016-2018 and will be formally evaluated to inform future actions. KindiLink aims to boost children's learning in the year before they start Kindergarten, build the confidence and capacity of families as their children's first teachers and forge strong and supportive links between home and school.
- *Child and Parent Centres:*  
21 Child and Parent Centres have been established on selected public school sites in vulnerable communities, most of which have a high proportion of Aboriginal families. The Centres are operated in partnership with non-government organisations and provide a suite of early learning, child and maternal health, parenting and playgroup services to families with children from birth to age eight, focusing on the years prior to school entry.

Additional to important strategic early childhood initiatives, the Department is progressing a range of complementary programs and projects across the public school system to address inequities identified in the BCEC report.

- Teacher Development Schools provide literacy and numeracy support for; case management of students at risk; and resources to support explicit, systematic teaching of literacy and numeracy that will improve outcomes of all students.
- The Department delivers face-to-face professional learning in digital technologies to schools located in socially disadvantaged communities. This professional learning emphasises instruction in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education, including the development of STEM capabilities such as: Creativity; independent thinking; computational thinking; critical analysis; problem solving; and collaboration in all students, particularly those acknowledged as under-represented including students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, female students and schools with a low Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage. The professional learning supports schools and teachers to close the

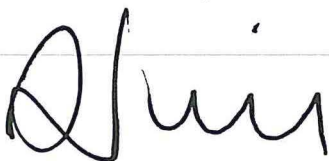
gap in educational achievements of Aboriginal students; and explore opportunities to teach in ways that enable Aboriginal students to better reach their full education potential.

- The Department's Innovation Partnership Schools initiative will bring together clusters of schools and other interested parties (partnerships) to expand and explore professional practices and develop innovative solutions to challenges faced by schools in the focus areas of STEM, digital technologies, engagement and retention and Aboriginal teaching and learning.
- The Department's student-centred funding model provides specific funding allocations to schools to help meet the learning needs of Aboriginal and disadvantaged students and additional funding based on school remoteness.
- The Department's Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework was developed to support all Department of Education staff to reflect on their approaches to the education of Aboriginal students. The Framework sets expected standards for staff when working with Aboriginal students, their families and communities. It supports staff to reflect on their behaviours, attitudes and practices and identify opportunities for improved action.
- The Department of Education is taking a more targeted approach to teaching and supporting Aboriginal students, through strengthened support for Aboriginal students, the establishment of an Aboriginal Education Teaching and Learning Directorate in 2017, research partnerships, and the engagement of Elders in Residence. The Elders in Residence will support schools' endeavours to build stronger partnerships with local Aboriginal people and for school staff to gain a greater appreciation of the cultural influence on Aboriginal children's learning. They will also provide high level advice on system matters.
- The Kimberley Schools project provides \$25 million Royalties for Regions funding over three years, to customise, intensify and better support existing strategies to accelerate Aboriginal student progress in Kimberley schools and communities that opt in to the project.
- The Clontarf Foundation Academies program provides a range of in-school and extracurricular activities for male Aboriginal students to support engagement in school and to assist their transitions through school and into post-school destinations. Funding for seven of the 24 academies is provided through a partnership with the Department for Regional Development through the Royalties for Regions funding scheme, in recognition of the relative disadvantage faced by Aboriginal students in regional areas.
- The Department's *Strategic Plan for WA Public Schools 2016–2019: High Performance – High Care*, sets high expectations for success for every student in every school by encouraging greater responsibility of parents and the community to lift student attendance, alongside implementation of school-based strategies.
- The Department of Education focuses its resources on attendance improvement actions that address the causes of student absence.
- An online Student Attendance Toolkit provides schools with comprehensive guidance for:
  - planning for improved student attendance, including target-setting;
  - adopting practices that lead to improved student, parent and community engagement in school; and
  - selecting and implementing targeted strategies that address the causes of absence.
- The Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS) is a Commonwealth initiative, aimed at improving the attendance rates of Aboriginal students, and supporting Aboriginal people to move from income support to paid employment. There are currently ten Western Australian public schools participating in this initiative. The Department employs an officer to coordinate the strategy across all ten schools and is the RSAS provider in two of these locations, Fitzroy Valley District High School and the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School.

- The Department has completed the evaluation of its two legislated attendance initiatives, attendance panels and attendance officers to determine how these initiatives can be best implemented. The findings will be used to inform strategic directions and the development of additional Attendance Toolkit resources for schools.
- Schools access a range of supports to improve learning outcomes for Aboriginal students, including:
  - the English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) Progress Map – a planning, monitoring, assessment and reporting tool for teachers of Aboriginal English or Kriol speaking students;
  - the Capability Framework: teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander EAL/D learners. The Framework provides guidelines to ensure that teachers have the knowledge, understandings and skills to inform their practice when teaching Aboriginal EAL/D students;
  - online practical classroom teaching resources to support primary and secondary Aboriginal students to achieve literacy and numeracy success; and
  - online resources that aim to improve the literacy and numeracy of Aboriginal secondary students and build their career aspirations.
- The Commonwealth-funded Aboriginal Early Childhood Language Support Program addresses the school readiness of Aboriginal students in Pre-primary and Year 1 by providing professional learning and support to early childhood teachers in up to 50 schools with significant numbers of Aboriginal students.
- The State Government's Aboriginal Youth Services Investment Reforms enable the Department to align its priorities to include investment in participation and engagement programs and services that support at-risk Aboriginal students.
- Other specific strategies include the:
  - Follow the Dream: Partnerships for Success program, which provides after-school tuition and mentoring support to Aboriginal secondary students to assist them to achieve positive academic outcomes and meaningful post-school destinations such as university, further training or employment;
  - Aboriginal School-Based Training program, which is a training program for Year 10 students, and for Year 11 and 12 students who are not yet 'work ready', to undertake a school-based apprenticeship or traineeship; and
  - Aboriginal Youth Ranger program, which aims to improve the retention of Aboriginal students to Year 12 and assist in their transition to further education, training and work.

Thank you for taking the time to write to me to inform me of the availability of the BCEC *Educate Australia? Education Inequality in Australia Report*

Yours sincerely



SHARYN O'NEILL  
DIRECTOR GENERAL

14 AUG 2017