

Submission
No 84

INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE

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Date received: 5/09/2008



St Vincent's College

150 years of Spirit, Vitality & Community

[1858 - 2008]



Submission to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Indigenous Disadvantage August 2008

Our School Ethos

Visitors to our school often remark on the warmth, friendliness, confidence and enthusiasm of the students. A distinctive spirit of community and hospitality pervades each aspect of school life which reflects the tradition of the Sisters of Charity who founded the College in 1858, our Ignatian spirituality, our strong orientation to social justice, and to a vibrant sense of the sacred in our community.

We seek to underpin all relationships and structures in our school community with the values of justice and respect.

As well as fostering in our students a genuine sense of community reflecting Catholic values, we also recognise our responsibility for nurturing the personal development and well being of each student.

Background to the Indigenous Education program

The school has maintained an ongoing commitment to addressing disadvantage since its foundation in 1858. A particular expression of this commitment is reconciliation with Indigenous people and the provision of Catholic education for indigenous young women.

There are no known records in the 150 year history of our school indicating specific targeted educational programs for indigenous boarding students. It is believed that our previous indigenous students participated in the regular learning programs offered to all students at the time.

Our current program however increasingly addresses the specific learning and pastoral care needs of Indigenous young women, most of whom come from rural and remote locations in NSW.

In 2001 two students from the North Coast of NSW were enrolled on full scholarships. One of these scholarships was provided by the Sisters of Charity Foundation and the other by St Vincent's College. These scholarships covered total boarding and tuition costs for each year of each student's enrolment. The College received no direct government funding for indigenous students at that time apart from Commonwealth and State recurrent funding.

These first Indigenous students completed their Year 12 studies in 2006. In the meantime a further 10 Indigenous students have accepted full scholarship places at the College. An enrolment condition since 2006 is that each student qualifies for Abstudy and that this allowance is paid directly to the school. There has been an average \$4000 to \$5000 gap per student between the Abstudy grant received and the total boarding and tuition cost. With the benefit of the Abstudy grants the College has gradually been able to increase the number of full scholarships for Indigenous young women.

Indigenous enrolments 2008

The College has an ongoing commitment to increase the number of Indigenous enrolments from the current 11 in 2008/2009 to approximately 20 students by 2010.

At present the demand for boarding places at St Vincent's College far outstrips our current capacity to fully fund them.

Support for Indigenous Students

Indigenous students from remote locations often lack the necessary literacy and numeracy skills to succeed at secondary school level. The reasons for this are well documented including erratic past school attendance patterns, differing learning styles, health and family issues and a variety of cultural issues.

To help overcome these problems, many Indigenous parents seek to send their daughters away to boarding schools in major towns and cities. Whilst recognising that this is only one option for parents, and not for all, there is a growing evidence suggesting that indigenous students at boarding schools have vastly improved attendance rates, achieve higher academic results, have increased retention to Year 12, and enjoy improved access and success at tertiary education. St Vincent's College is keen to further contribute to such success for more young rural indigenous women.

Our school currently employs a part-time (0.6 FTE) Indigenous Education Officer to work in the Learning Support program to address the pastoral, health and educational needs of our indigenous boarders. The students are given additional tuition and homework help, in-class learning support, remedial reading programs, out-of-school-hours pastoral care activities and networking opportunities with Indigenous boarders in other Sydney metropolitan schools. The Indigenous Education Officer and the Learning Support Program staff receive training in appropriate resources and teaching methodologies that best assist the learning of Indigenous students.

The Department of Education Training, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEETWR) currently provides Commonwealth funding for a homework supervisor for 4 hours per week. This is a particularly valuable learning resource for the students.

Success of the Program

Four Indigenous HSC students will graduate at the end of 2008 and they intend pursuing further study at University. These students come from rural and outback towns in NSW. All were enrolled at St Vincent's College because of parental/family desire to give their daughters the best educational opportunities available. Unfortunately their local rural schools were not able to provide them with the wide range of subject offerings, extra-curricular activities and pastoral support available at St Vincent's College. All indigenous students enrolled at the College have enrolled as a result of personal recommendations to their families.

Based on the early success of our program it is reasonable to assume that many more indigenous parents will seek such worthwhile educational opportunities that promise improved life opportunities for their daughters. For over 100 years St Vincent's College has been committed to offering the daughters of rural parents education programs and opportunities that are unavailable in their home communities. We are equally committed to this provision for indigenous families who are not financially able to meet our tuition and boarding fees.

The continued success of our program depends on a range of factors including ongoing financial and material support. This offers the best chance at present for our Indigenous students to access worthwhile educational, pastoral and health programs to enable them to achieve their best and reach their full potential.

Michele Hugonnet
Principal

Adrian Robinson
Indigenous Education Officer