Catholic Education
SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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Dr Anna Dacre
Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Dr Dacre

It is with great pleasure that South Australia Commission for Catholic Schools (SACCS) accepts your invitation to provide some reflections in response to the *Terms of Reference* for the **Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities**, as follows.

The *Terms of Reference* document is a most positive recognition of the importance of Indigenous languages. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups have long advocated for Indigenous languages recognition, survival and revival initiatives. The *Terms of Reference* clearly attempts to redress any neglect of Indigenous languages in the Australian curriculum and is underscored by worthy aims of cultural inclusion.

SACCS appreciates that the *Terms of Reference* implicate the multi-tiered consultation which is currently underway in relation to the emergency response in Northern Territory communities. In our response to the *Terms of Reference*, SACCS affirms programs that foster the continuous improvement, maintenance and revitalisation of Indigenous languages and systems that encourage cross cultural understandings. Languages shift according to cultural environments and develop in ways that describe and represent new environments. SACCS recognises the contribution that Indigenous language communities make to preserve cultural traditions, to communicate Indigenous perspectives and worldviews, while offering inroads into understanding and operating in the ever complex contemporary world.

SACCS notes that in the 'Draft Shape Paper of the Australian Curriculum: Languages' (Draft Shape Paper) the term 'Australian languages' is used to designate the languages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. The Draft Paper additionally states that the inclusion of Indigenous languages will:

- meet the needs and rights of young people to learn about their own identity
- assist young people to understand and develop a deep appreciation of their culture, language, land and country.
- contribute to the well being of young people.

SACCS supports these premises and acknowledges the numerous benefits of including Indigenous languages in the curriculum, particularly in early education through a focus on oral communication.

A policy direction that values poly-lingualism, multi modal literacies and cultural diversity: honors home language/s, strengthens positive cultural identity formation, fosters the self esteem of Indigenous peoples and promotes the cultural experience and knowledge that Australians who are embodied by minority cultural heritage/s contribute to Australian society. We note the definition of literacy that underpins South Australian Certificate of Education:

> '…literacy is broadly defined as the ability to understand, analyse, critically respond to, and create spoken, written, and visual communications, and use information and communication technologies in different contexts' (SACE Board of SA Literacy Policy Jan 2009)

Notwithstanding, SACCS recognizes that particular attention needs to be given to the inclusion of Indigenous languages in schools. The implementation of programs that encourage the maintenance of Indigenous languages and the recruitment and employment of Indigenous educators to effectively undertake this role is a pertinent and complex dilemma, most specifically in urban settings. Indigenous Languages policy writers will need to work closely with Aboriginal communities and educational institutions to ensure engagement in decision making for the provision of effective outcomes in this arena.

The Australian Indigenous Languages Framework (SSABSA, 1996) identifies four different program types which are also outlined in the Draft Shape Paper. These include:

- Second language learning
- Home user language maintenance and development (the need to value multi-lingual programs)
- Language revival (including language renewal and language reclamation)
- Languages ecology

SACCS draws on research that supports the development of literacy in first languages *prior to* introducing literacy in subsequent languages. We support the position that conceptual understandings which underpin sound literacy practices are normally consolidated in a first language. Honed literacy skills can then be transferred more successfully across multiple languages.

ESL students in SACCS schools for example, are encouraged to use and value primary language/s at home and to continue to read and practice these literacies outside of school. We recognise the fundamental importance of first language acquisition. English literacies are developed by building on the skills and literacies already acquired in primary language/s. This model provides similar benefits for students with significant and/or severe language and communication disabilities, (including those whose first language is English).

As with all Australian students, English language competence (which includes the acquisition of multiple literacies) across a range of educational contexts and community contexts, is vital for successful access to education and training in vocational and tertiary fields, and meaningful participation in the workforce and the wider Australian community.

SACCS considers it a social justice issue that Indigenous Australians are supported to develop English language fluency in rigorous English as Second Language (ESL) programs alongside literacy/ies in first language/s. In communities where English is a second language or dialect, we promote educational models akin to those offered for migrant children in New Arrivals programs. This requires a language based curriculum delivered by teachers who have expertise in ESL teaching and learning. These programs are essential to the success of both multi-lingual programs, and post-school transitions for Indigenous people who work and function across multiple cultures.

Indigenous languages are developed across a broad range of contexts. Effective interpretation and translation therefore requires: poly-linguistic fluency, cultural appreciation and inclusive relationships with the multiple language communities that may be represented in any given context. A strong poly-lingual education program, that places value on the diverse breadth of language and community representation and at the same time, fosters career options for those who acquire multiple literacies and languages is fundamental.

By way of conclusion, I refer to the relevant SACCS policies and guidelines that underscore the perspectives and positions reflected in this document:

- *SACCS Vision Statement*
  http://www.adelaide.catholic.org.au/sites/CatholicEducationOfficesSA/media/files/2839.pdf

- *Languages Policy*
  http://www.adelaide.catholic.org.au/sites/CatholicEducationOfficesSA/media/files/2221.pdf

- *SACCS Literacy Strategy Review Report*
  http://www.adelaide.catholic.org.au/sites/CatholicEducationOfficesSA/learning-and-student-wellbeing/literacy

- *Indigenous Education Policy 2003*
  http://www.adelaide.catholic.org.au/sites/CatholicEducationOfficesSA/media/files/1288.pdf

- *Shaping Futures Together: Catholic Education for a Multicultural Society Policy 2003*
  http://www.adelaide.catholic.org.au/sites/CatholicEducationOfficesSA/media/files/1298.pdf

- *Students with Disabilities Policy*
  http://www.adelaide.catholic.org.au/sites/CatholicEducationOfficesSA/about-us/saccs-policies-procedures-a-d

I am grateful for this opportunity to contribute to the inquiry and wish you well in this significant endeavour.

Yours sincerely

DR PAUL SHARKEY
EXECUTIVE OFFICER
SOUTH AUSTRALIA COMMISSION FOR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

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