

Submission to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into the determinants of regional airfares

March 2026

Introduction

Catholic Education Queensland Limited (CEQL) provides this submission on the inquiry into the determinants of regional airfares, to inform the Australian Government Productivity Commission's recommendations to support a competitive, reliable and affordable regional aviation network.

CEQL is the peak strategic body with state-wide responsibilities for Catholic schooling in Queensland. This submission is provided on behalf of the five Diocesan and 17 Religious Institutes and Ministerial Public Juridic Persons Catholic School Authorities which, between them, operate a total of 313 Catholic schools that educate more than 160,000 students in Queensland.

CEQL acknowledges that this stage of the inquiry is designed to gather broad information on the dynamics and mechanisms at play in the setting of regional airfares. Within the call for submissions, information requests cover topics including why regional aviation is so important, how much fares influence demand for regional air services, what factors influence regional airfares, characteristics of the regional aviation sector that influence the level of airfares, whether government policies or regulations have made a difference, and what could be done to make fares more affordable to improve access to aviation.

As the peak body for Catholic education in Queensland, CEQL holds neither the experience nor expertise to comment on many of these topics. However, we provide this submission as a representative of our many Catholic schools across the state who provide an education to young people from rural and remote regions and who rely on regional flights to transport vital resources, including staff, to do this.

Context

In 2025, Queensland Catholic schools educated students across 10 **very remote** schools including:

- Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School (Hammond Island and Thursday Island), Torres Strait
- Sacred Heart Primary School, Cunnamulla
- St Finbarr's School, Quilpie
- St Mary's School, Charleville
- St Patrick's Primary School, Mitchell
- St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, Barcaldine
- St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, Blackall
- St Francis Catholic School, Hughenden
- St Patrick's Catholic School, Winton
- Our Lady's Catholic Primary School, Longreach

Queensland Catholic schools educated students across the following **remote** schools:

- St Joseph's Parish School, Weipa
- St Patrick's School, St George,
- Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Catholic Primary School, Springsure
- St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, Clermont
- St Kieran's Catholic School, Mount Isa
- St John Bosco Catholic School, Collinsville
- St Joseph's Catholic School, Cloncurry
- St Joseph's Catholic School, Mount Isa
- St Peter's Catholic School, Halifax
- St Michael's Catholic School, Palm Island
- Good Shepherd Catholic College, Mount Isa
- St Teresa's College, Abergowrie
- Mount Isa Flexible School, Sunset
- Holy Spirit College, Cooktown

A further 64 schools educate students in **outer regional** areas across the state including in Emerald, Charters Towers, Tara, Goondiwindi, Sarina, Biloela, Monto, Ingham, Ayr, Bowen, Innisfail, Tully, Babinda, Ingham, Roma, Stanthorpe, the Whitsundays, and regions surrounding Cairns (among others).

These schools provide a vital service to support young people from very remote, remote and outer regional areas to access a high-quality, in-person education.

This submission provides a response to the question from the call for submissions relating to *Why is regional aviation so important?* in two parts. Firstly, it will address the importance of regular, reliable and affordable regional airfares to support teacher attraction and retention. Secondly, it will provide comment on the role of regional air services to support the travel of young people and their family from remote areas – including agricultural and First Nations communities – to attend boarding school.

Important contextual information

The high cost of regional airfares is referred to throughout this submission. However, it is important to remember that for most, airfares represent just a portion of the total costs incurred for people living in remote or regional areas travelling.

For example, for most travelling to Mitchell from Brisbane, the most likely path would include:

- travel from location in Brisbane to domestic airport
- flight from Brisbane to Roma
- drive from Roma to Mitchell (approximately one hour) then on to final destination.

Each stage of the journey represents additional costs.

Secondly, the costs of regional airfares are not static and can vary significantly based on elements such as:

- where applicable, if resident fare caps have been exceeded
- the need for sufficient luggage weight
- peak times which can increase costs significantly (over \$1,000 each way per fare).

For travel purposes relating to schools, the requirement to travel can be unpredictable and sometimes families and/or schools must proceed with flight bookings despite exorbitant costs. This can have a profound impact on families who are already likely experiencing financial pressures from the rising costs of living. The availability of flights, which is lesser in regional areas, compounded with their high costs can create very real impacts on families with limited alternatives for travel available.

Similarly, the excessive cost of regional airfares limit schools' ability to participate in valuable extra-curricular activities that could enrich student's learning experiences. While excursions and experiences can be expensive for all schools, students in regional and remote areas are less likely to be able to engage with valuable experiences because of exorbitant travel costs.

Teacher workforce attraction and retention

Section 36 of the *Human Rights Act 2019* states that every child has the right to have access to primary and secondary education appropriate to the child's needs. Core to the provision

of education for all Australian young people is the ability for schools to attract, and retain, teachers.

The teaching workforce in Australia has experienced widespread and persistent shortages. As Queensland's Audit Office recently reported, there are approximately 600 reported teaching vacancies across 579 schools in regional and remote areas of Queensland¹. Strategies exist across all schooling sectors to attract and retain teachers to these areas², many of which provide increased payments to support travel to/from the locality and additional leave days to visit family. However, the benefit of this funding is limited when the costs associated with travelling to and from the school is inflated due to the high costs of regional airfares.

Young people in schools in remote and regional Australia deserve access to a high-quality education, and government support for the provision of high-quality education should consider access for teachers to all schools. Importantly, attracting and retaining teachers to very remote, remote and outer regional schools should not be limited by the costs for teachers to travel to and from the school. Teachers in these schools can already face many and varied challenges beyond the scope of experience for metropolitan schools and the personal expense for travel carried by teachers to support their employment, for many, can make the decision to relocate undesirable.

While schools in very remote, remote and outer regional areas can face significant difficulties in attracting teachers, Australian Teacher Workforce Data shows us that oftentimes the teachers they can attract are more likely to have to teach subjects they are untrained in (called 'out of field' teaching)³. Teachers in very remote and remote areas are far more likely to be required to undertake some (54%) or all (11%) out of field teaching than their counterparts in major cities (40% or 6% respectively). These teachers show remarkable adaptability, resilience and dedication to their craft – oftentimes, having relocated a long way with their family, and/or while taking up positions away from their loved ones.

¹ Queensland Audit Office (2025) [Performance audit report: Attracting and retaining teachers in regional and remote Queensland](#). Report 5: 2025-26.

² Strategies within the Queensland Catholic sector are led by Diocesan authorities in Cairns, Townsville, Rockhampton and Toowoomba.

³ Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2025) [ATWD National Trends: Initial Teacher Education Pipeline](#) (Dec 2025 ed., 2005-2023).

Despite the incredible efforts of teachers in these schools, research shows us that young people from remote and regional areas can be vulnerable across multiple domains when compared to their same-age peers in metropolitan areas. In NAPLAN in 2025, the rates of students in Year 3 achieving within the Needing Additional Support category in Reading in very remote (56.5%), remote (27.8%) and outer regional (18.2%) schools far exceeded the proportion of students Needing Additional Support in major cities (8.5%). On the other end of the NAPLAN spectrum, in 2025 results for Year 9 students in the Numeracy domain similarly reflected vulnerabilities across very remote (55.8%), remote (29%) and outer regional areas (17.9%) when compared with their major city peers the same age (7.9%). Results like these echo across all year levels and learning domains, with many students from very remote, remote and outer regional areas achieving below the National Minimum Standard across the domains of reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy⁴.

Furthermore, according to the Australian Government, the average 15-year-old from remote Australia is around 1.5 years behind metropolitan students in science and performs significantly below the international average in mathematics⁵. In 2015, researchers from the University of New England published a practice report on *Improving Mathematics and Science Education in Rural Australia* highlighting that a key factor contributing to difficulties in STEM education across rural and remote areas in Australia is school's inability to obtain adequately qualified staff⁶. Ten years later, little has changed.

As we know, NAPLAN and STEM results in isolation are not indicative of a young person's ability to lead a full, happy and healthy life. However, outcomes in literacy and numeracy contribute to young people's ability to engage with schooling and impact their outcomes post-school such as in their health and employment⁷. As such, it is vital that all schools regardless of their geographical location can source, appoint and retain high-quality teachers. For schools in very remote, remote and outer regional areas, airfares can play an important part in the accessibility of teachers relocating from other areas to take up a position in a school far from home.

⁴ Sourced from [NAPLAN National Results](#) published by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority July 2025.

⁵ Australian Government Department of Education's [Remote, rural and regional students](#)

⁶ Whannell, R. and Tobias, S. (2015) [Improving Mathematics and Science Education in Rural Australia: A practice report](#). *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*.

⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020) [Australia's children](#).

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL)'s Australian Teacher Workforce Data reported that from 2012 to 2023, the proportion of commencing Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students living in a predominantly regional or remote area declined from 27% to 22%; despite a corresponding increase in commencing ITE students living in metropolitan areas (74% in 2012 to 78% in 2023)⁸.

These statistics signify challenges that schools in these locations can face to attract and retain teachers and these challenges are compounded by expensive airfares that limit the staff member's ability to easily travel to visit family and friends or explore pursuits outside of their community.

As a key mechanism to upskill staff and ensure ongoing professional learning, all teachers engage in formal professional development each year. There is a plethora of professional development opportunities available to teachers across any given school year. However, schools in regional areas face difficulties supporting staff to attend professional learning opportunities in person because of the additional travel costs associated with their attendance and significant costs in flying relief staff to the school to ensure their teaching load is covered during their absence. As a result, teachers in regional areas face lesser opportunities to access high-quality professional development.

Education is a key mechanism to support young people to overcome barriers facing them to access post-school education and employment. More needs to be done to ensure that Australia's young people from very remote, remote, outer regional and regional areas are not further disadvantaged by the inflated cost of regional air travel.

Access to and from school for boarding students

The Queensland Catholic sector currently has 15 boarding schools as follows:

- St Augustine's College (Cairns)
- Mount St Bernard College (Herberton)
- St Monica's College (Cairns)
- Holy Spirit College (Cooktown)
- The Cathedral College (Rockhampton)
- St Ursula's College (Toowoomba)
- Columba Catholic College (Charters Towers)

⁸ Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2025) [ATWD National Trends: Initial Teacher Education Pipeline](#) (Dec 2025 ed., 2005-2023).

- St Teresa's College (Abergowrie)
- St Joseph's Nudgee College (Boondall)
- St Brendan's College (Yeppoon)
- Marist College Ashgrove (Ashgrove)
- Stuartholme School (Toowong)
- Downlands College (Toowoomba)
- St Ursula's College (Yeppoon)
- St Patrick's College Townsville (Townsville)

Each of these schools enrol young people from a wide variety of regional areas and, in some cases, states. For many of these students, access to an education via a boarding school is key to their ability to access a high-quality education that provides not only for access to the curriculum but opportunity to develop socially amongst peers in a face-to-face setting. Due to the limited availability of boarding positions in state-run facilities, the decision to attend a non-government boarding school is oftentimes made from necessity despite the significant costs a family can carry to support the education.

Australia's extreme weather impacts travel each year. For schools, weather events that cancel flights or make flights unaffordable can inhibit student ability to attend school. Because school funding is tied to student enrolment numbers, any student absence has profound impacts on school funding at crucial census times.

The Australian Government currently provides funding to support students and some families to travel to and from school. The two key federal funds include Service's Australia's Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme, and ABSTUDY.

The **Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme** is designed to support the families of young people who must attend home school, do distance education or board away from home for approved reasons including because they are geographically isolated, have a special education need, or have no reasonable access to a school. Funding through this scheme can support:

- boarding allowance
- distance education allowance
- second home allowance
- pensioner education supplement.

This funding is means-tested. Parents earning more than \$65,289 per year receive reduced support regardless of the costs the family incur sending their child/ren to school. While allowances under the scheme help to offset the costs of boarding charges and incidentals

such as laundry and toiletries, they do not include fees for tuition or assistance to cover necessary additional costs such as for travel to or from school.

As an illustration⁹:

	Fee	Government subsidy	Out of pocket
Tuition fees	\$20,000	\$0	\$20,000
Boarding fees	\$20,000	Up to \$13,582 (pending parental income)	\$6,418+
TOTAL out of pocket per child per year			\$26,418+

NB: indicative fees are not specific to a specific school and are provided for illustration purposes only. Differing fee schedules exist across Australian boarding schools.

Additional costs for attending boarding, such as travelling to and from school around school holidays or to participate in family events presents additional significant costs for families.. The inflated costs for regional air travel compound the burden, in some cases forcing families to make difficult decisions around whether it is affordable for their child to travel home for school holiday breaks, whether parents can travel to the school for important events, or whether children must miss out on vital school time to travel while airfares are cheaper.

The research is clear that family engagement in a young person’s schooling has a profound impact on student outcomes¹⁰. Many schools schedule various events throughout each year to include the families of boarders such as for supporting transitions, formal, valedictory, awards nights and other school events. Families living in remote or regional areas are forced to make decisions around whether they can attend these important rites of passage because of the inflated costs of airfares.

The costs for families to send their children to boarding school is significant and for many, the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme provides vital but inadequate support that does not extend to the costs associated with air travel. The inflated costs of regional air travel and its disproportionate impact on families living in remote and regional areas is a vital consideration for this inquiry.

⁹ Subsidy sourced from the [Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme](#) 2026 payment rates.

¹⁰ Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2024) [Spotlight: Strengthening parent engagement to improve student outcomes](#).

ABSTUDY is a funding stream that is specific to First Nations students or apprentices and is designed to support with:

- School fees
- Boarding fees
- Living costs
- Travel costs
- Buying school materials.

ABSTUDY is by nature more comprehensive than the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme and because of this, specific streams within ABSTUDY Fares provide assistance for students living away from home (such as in boarding) to travel. Examples for travel that could be covered by ABSTUDY include:

- for sporting events
- to attend a funeral or Sorry Business
- for parent teacher interviews
- for school or community events
- a student graduating or receiving an award
- a student or a family member is sick or hurt
- an emergency or disaster
- a student is homesick and thinking of leaving school
- a student is at risk of being expelled.

Importantly, travel costs for student suspensions or exclusions are not covered by ABSTUDY, and often schools bear significant costs to cover airfares for students and accompanying staff to ensure they can return home safely.

From 2023–2024, the Australian Government’s expenditure on ABSTUDY was \$352.3 million. This funding represents real benefits to the communities it serves and opens pathways for First Nations young people to access an education that otherwise they may not have been able to access. However, inflated airfares contribute to the high expenses of ABSTUDY and further research into the proportion of ABSTUDY that was specifically for the support of air travel to regional or remote destinations would support the inquiry to understand the total cost that high airfares are costing the government.

Advocacy for increases to the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme to support non-indigenous families to access support for additional expenses, such as travel, is ongoing.

Conclusion

CEQL welcomes the Productivity Commissions’ inquiry into the determinants of regional airfares and strongly encourages that throughout the inquiry’s consideration, attention is not

only given to industry constraints on regional aviation but also to the very real, every-day impacts of high regional airfares for many Australians seeking access to an education.

Thank you for your consideration of this submission. Should you have any additional questions, please contact Dr Hannah Orchard, Education Officer