

Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee – Inquiry into the Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017

Submission by
Catholic School Parents
Australia



Catholic School Parents Australia represents the parents of over 750,000 students in Catholic schools across Australia. We are proud of the Catholic sector's 200-year contribution to education across Australia.

As parents we believe that the recent funding announcements and consequently the proposed legislation before Parliament unfairly undermine the Catholic sector's ability to offer affordable and accessible Catholic education to all those who seek it for their children.

It appears that the Government has grossly misunderstood system funding arrangements and the benefits to Government and the community when systems, particularly broad-based systems such as Catholic education, are funded to deliver education in an equitable and efficient way. It also appears that the Government has mistakenly determined that the best comparison of a Catholic systemic school is a stand-alone independent school – when in fact the more appropriate comparison, for consistency, would be with a government system school. We believe that this decision has distorted the funding picture and seriously compromises the equitable funding of Catholic schools within the model.

If we as a nation are to achieve the goals of the Melbourne Declaration for all students then establishing an equitable funding process is essential and we believe that currently the new funding model is not achieving this ideal. Many Catholic school parents are becoming increasingly worried about how their school will be affected and whether increased school fees will put the option of Catholic education beyond the reach of many families either with children currently in Catholic schools or considering Catholic education in the future.

Catholic schools are not run to make a profit and every endeavour is pursued to minimise fees such that a Catholic education is accessible to all parents who seek it for their children. Children of low to middle income families make up the majority of students in local, low-fee parish schools, schools that often closely align with local government schools. The vast majority of these local parish Catholic schools do not have students from predominantly high income families.

The current SES methodology masks this reality in middle and higher SES areas. We support Catholic education's call for this methodology to be reviewed. We also believe the system weighted average SES goes some way to moderating the negative effects of the SES methodology on those systems and allows Catholic education to remain an accessible and affordable option in every community. While the SES remains in the model as a measure of relative need, so too should the system-weighted average SES.

Catholic School Parents Australia makes the follow points -

- The government should genuinely consult with all education sectors prior to finalising the legislation;
- The government should continue the System Weighted Average funding process in some form for Catholic school systems around Australia. This enables the fulfilment of Catholic education's mission for low-SES, rural and remote schools and to meet needs that are not measured by the SES. Current funding arrangements for Catholic schools have proven efficiencies and allow for system co-responsibility to support

schools in need - some of which are located in contexts where no fees are charged or contexts that have no ability to collect fees that are charged;

- In addition to the co-responsibility that currently exists in Catholic school systems, many Catholic schools offer fee reductions for families who do not have a capacity to pay full fees. This inability to pay by some parents who desire a Catholic education is a regular reality faced by many Catholic school communities;
- Catholic schools in Australia made agreements with the previous Governments of the day in good faith to work within an agreed national funding model that had been developed after extensive research and consultation. Enterprise agreements and business plans have been generated by schools and systems of Catholic education in anticipation of this model. Catholic School Parents ask that SRS model is investigated and we are assured that it is based on well researched evidence.
- While there has been some support for the Government's funding proposal from some quarters, there has been a high degree of confusion and frustration expressed from Catholic school leaders and the government sector; and underpinning CSPA concerns is the firm belief that the proposed changes to be introduced have, to date, lacked genuine consultation with Catholic education authorities, Catholic School parents and Catholic School principals.

In summary, it would be reckless of CSPA to support such significant changes to school funding given that:

- These changes are a source of significant concern for a number of Catholic jurisdictions , including ones where funding will increase at significantly slower rates than other school sectors and one where funding for some Catholic systemic schools will actually be reduced;
- There is a misguided commitment to dismantle the System Weighted Average, which has allowed Catholic school authorities, and indeed other non-government school systems, to offer an affordable and equitable education for the families, across a broad socio-economic and geographic spectrum.
- A significant concern is that disability funding will show a further significant decrease in funding to Catholic schools using the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data which has been independently reviewed by PWC and shown to lack rigour in the data at this point. This would have a big affect on our most vulnerable families who are seeking educational outcomes for their children in a Catholic school.
- There is genuine concern that many parents and families may not be able to exercise school choice because of the increased fee expectations imposed on them by this new funding model.
- The Gonski review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools will influence the conditions of funding for all sectors and we believe that any legislation should not be finalised until this review is complete and report provided to government.

In conclusion, Catholic School Parents Australia have been working closely with the National Catholic Education Commission around the funding announcements and we are in full support of their submission to this Senate Committee.