

# Liberal's lost legacy?

IMPACT OF FUNDING CUTS ON CANBERRA CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE  
ON EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT INQUIRY INTO  
THE AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION AMENDMENT BILL 2017

Michael Cuddihy |

## Submission to Senate Inquiry Australian Education Amendment Bill

I can barely believe I have to write this submission.

I am just a dad with 3 kids at Catholic schools in Canberra, without any political memberships. My wife is Chair of the St Thomas More School Board. She attended the school as a girl, and is deeply involved in the school community. My family live in the suburb of Campbell, Canberra.

This is my submission as I feel compelled to advocate for our school community because of the disconnect between:

- the ideas of the predominantly left wing education academics who look at education through a social justice and wealth redistribution lens;
- Federal and State Governments petrified about the size of the investment needs; and the
- The overwhelming desire in some parts of the population to whack catholic institutions and parents for the shameful events and governance that have been revealed in the Royal Commission

This combination mixed in with the obstinate Minister Birmingham might close our small, local and modest catholic school, St Thomas More Primary School, Campbell ACT.

After nearly two decades working in and out of Government agencies – State and Federal - I thought Australian politics and public policy processes were so much better than has been revealed over the last 3 weeks. I was wrong.

### CONSULTATION AND POOR PUBLIC POLICY PROCESS

When I am talking to other parents in the school playground about the how the Minister says that he has consulted with the Catholic Education Sector on these changes, I tell them “He is talking out his a%#e.”

Submission after submission to this enquiry will make this point, but in the language more commonly found in parliamentary submissions. But I reckon more parents will talk the same way about Minister Birmingham coming into the next election.

It so frustrating to find out that a Minister can announce a 10 year school funding plan that might close your school without consulting the second largest provider of school education in the country on the mechanics and impacts of the catholic sector.

I do want to positively acknowledge that Senator Seselja has shown that he understands the impact that these changes will have on ACT Catholic schools. He has at least engaged with the issues and tried to work within Government. I hope that there other members of the Government that will listen to their community.

Labor have also clearly seen the need for a fair approach for all kids in all sectors – public, catholic and independent. I thank Bill Shorten and Tanya Plibersek for their ongoing support, and willingness to look at our parish school and make a judgement that it is not anything like the elite high fee schools that will share our SES funding level.

### But the Minister will explain

I read his confusing website on funding for schools that in no represents funding for 90% of schools who receive block funding. (Seriously, if that site was by an airline or a private sector company, the ACCC would have closed it and fined the organisation by now.) The public servants who prepared it should be ashamed of themselves.

I read the letter he wrote to our School Principal that is clear that St Thomas' More Primary School, Campbell is losing funding.

My hopes leapt when I heard the Minister talk to Sabra Lane on 3 May 2017, when he was asked:

"You mentioned, 24 schools will lose funding, are you ringing them personally to explain why?"

He answered:

"I've certainly asked my department though to make sure that we get in touch with all of them and I'll happily talk with any school that wants to speak with me about what this means for them."

<https://ministers.education.gov.au/birmingham/interview-abc-am-sabra-lane-1>

I foolishly hoped that the Minister would honour his public commitment, and would see the extremely modest school where he wanted to cut funding. So I spoke to the School Principal and invited the Minister to attend a public meeting of the parents and teachers at St Thomas More to explain what the Government's funding cuts mean to our school, and all ACT Catholic schools.

I know it was naïve, but our school is only 7 minutes from Parliament House and on the way to the airport, so I did have hopes.

Instead, the Minister embarked on a tour of friendly photo shoots around the country, and just repeated the same 5-6 talking points, over and over and over again. A disciplined, modern politician, who does not listen or look at the actual impact of his policy.

So I started calling people in the Catholic Education Commission, hoping that maybe he or his Department, was talking to them. Nope. Started watching TV interviews, reading radio transcripts seeking any indication that the Minister or the Government was listening or understanding the impact on Catholic schooling. Nope, just the same monotone delivery of the same few dot points.

The State Education Ministers did not do any better at COAG, just the splendid opportunity for them to write a submission to this inquiry, so at least I am in good company.

All parties complained that the Department would not release the underlying data, and then the Department delayed, and delayed while the Minister cosied up to the greens before any serious analysis could be done.

So Minister Birmingham is not really interested in meeting us, or anyone really. He did not answer letters, or emails. His Department did not respond to FOI requests. He did not respond to local Catholic Education Office, the National Catholic Education Office. Calling, emailing, writing, and tweeting – nothing really worked.

Instead, here I am. Writing this submission.

**So, he won't talk to Catholic Educators, Teachers or Parents, BUT...**

**Catholics are “dishonest” to talk about funding cuts**

There was something deeply ironic about Minister Pyne calling the National Catholic Education Commission campaign on funding cuts “dishonest”.

Think about it, one South Australian Minister (Birmingham) writes to my School Principal saying we are getting funding cuts, another South Australian Minister (Pyne) has the intellectual flexibility and sheer chutzpah to tell me that Catholic parents are ‘dishonest’ if we talk about funding cuts.

### **SECTOR BLIND? HUH – IN WHAT WAY?**

As a dad, I don't understand why my schools and children receive less public funding than if I enrolled them on the public school on the other side of the oval.

Minister Birmingham says his plan is sector blind, and based on need; which is plainly not true where I live.

I don't know why my kids are worth less funding from the Australian Government (or the ACT Government) when they wear the “overfunded” blue polo shirt of St Thomas More, but so much more worthy of “need based funding” if they wear the yellow polo shirt of Campbell Primary School.

I will leave it the usual cohort of economists, education academics, and other bodies to pick apart the funding models, SES, ISCEA, etc. These have all been contested for decades - inch by inch of the thousands of submissions, articles, and column by column in spreadsheets.

I just want to show you the impact where I live, Campbell, Canberra

St Thomas More and Campbell Primary School were both built when the suburb was developed in the 1960s. They have both been important parts of our community and share an oval. They serve the same community and have a very similar profile on myschool.

Both schools are nice, and have many parents engaged in the school, many kids from outside the area because both schools are popular with the Defence community. Both schools are similarly modest primary schools, neither are gold plated.

Campbell Primary school has higher School ICSEA value (1147) than my kids school (St Thomas More, 1132). The Australian Government website tells me that Campbell Primary School will receive an increase in Australian Govt funding of \$1,907,100 over 10 years. They will also get higher funding from the ACT Government, who pay most of their running costs. Total public funding per student in 2015 of \$11,723.

On other side of oval, St Thomas More Primary School, with lower ICSEA score, gets less public funding from the ACT Government and the Australian Government now and receives even less funding in 10 years time. A decrease in \$214,400 over 10 years, while the costs for the school's teachers go up at roughly 3% per year.

Teachers and staff make up roughly 80% of the schools costs, and no-one – not even the indefatigable, and unashamed Minister Pyne – can credibly argue that fees will not have to rise significantly if funding goes down for 10 years, while costs go up for 10 years.

I have no idea how increases in teachers costs will be paid without large fee increases. This will impact, and has already dramatically impacted new enrolments, largely due to the Ministers announcements and public debate on fee rises for catholic schools. Schools live and die on enrolments.

The Minister steadfastly refuses to acknowledge that there will be fee increases or closures. I suspect he secretly hopes that we will use the colour printer to print money; cause otherwise there will be very significant fee rises, which the Catholic Education Office estimates will take the fees from roughly \$3k per student to \$8k per student unless the rest of the system bails us out. But they are all getting cuts too. Every catholic school in the ACT. Goulburn will not escape either.

## HISTORY REVERSED AND LEGACY LOST

Amongst academics and public sector advocates it is fashionable to write wistfully about the past, when Catholic schools got a much smaller share of public funding for education. Dolefully, education academics write about statesman such as Whitlam and Howard giving parents real choices to send their kids to the school that reflected the parent's values.

It is important for the author to bang out a sentence or two proclaiming that you are not envious of the Catholic education system, or that there is not any hint of religious intolerance. (This is saved up for the left wing echo chamber that is twitter.) Having done that, there is a free rein to attack the catholic education system knowing that the lack of diversity and plural thought in amongst education academia helped lead to the culture wars between universities and the liberal government.

The Minister has locked a million or so parents and teachers out of the process in deciding a new funding formula. He has provided dramatic advantages to the independent sector, and more money to the public sector.

Our catholic schools have to pay our teacher salaries, and our kids are not worth any less.

Parents in Catholic schools know our fees will rise. I genuinely fear it could lead to the closure of my small catholic primary school. You know what happens next. Some kids move to public system at higher cost to public purse, some kids move to other catholic schools. Everyone is angry and emotional. Choice and capacity from the system is lost.

It will be the Liberal party that they hold accountable, and the legacy of leaders like John Howard, to get many Catholics to vote Liberal, will be quickly lost.

## And the answer is...

A few practical suggestions for :

1. The 'near' approximation of family wealth based on the past average income where I live, and my education would not be accepted in any other policy area within Government. It is not acceptable to turn the education system in ACT and elsewhere upside because Department cannot come up with a better measure.
2. The measure of capacity to pay needs to accurately measure wealth of parents; not the wealth of people in the neighborhood. The current policy overestimates the theoretical capacity of families attending low fee catholic schools; and underestimates the demonstrated capacity of families attending high fee independent schools to contribute.
3. The Government already has the actual data on parents income via the Tax system. I don't understand why dated, homogenized census data is used for funding education, when better, current and more granular data is already available in the ATO databases.
4. The requirement to contribute more to schooling needs to be consistent across high SES schools in all sectors. Why do high SES state school parents get a free ride?
5. Block funding systems already report the allocation of funds on myschool. They could also report the reasons, on myschool, why the particular school got more or less than a funding formula might suggest. I believe that the various State Depts of Education and Catholic Education Authorities are well able to make these decisions, but more transparency on the reasons for the breakdown would be good.

Weakening the catholic sector is not the answer for the Australian Capital Territory or elsewhere, but for many public school advocates and academics, it seems like the default answer to a lot of different and complex questions.

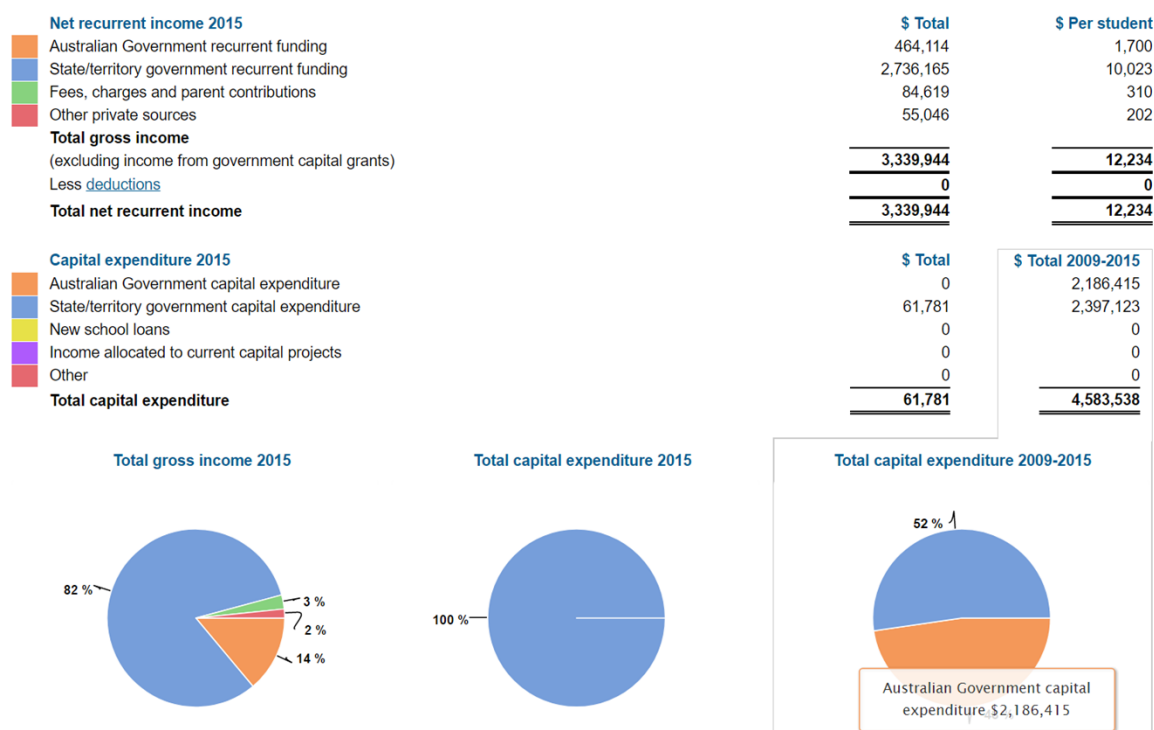
All Australians deserve a fair funding system for schools, and they want affordable choices for their children's education

We already have a progressive taxation system to redistribute wealth.

Appendix 1 Information on Campbell Primary School and St Thomas More Primary School

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016														
<b>School facts</b>					<b>Student background</b>																	
School sector: Government					Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)																	
School type: Primary					School ICSEA value: 1147																	
Year range: K-6					Average ICSEA value: 1000																	
Location: Major Cities					Data source: Parent information																	
<b>School staff</b>					<b>Distribution of students <sup>2</sup></b>																	
Teaching staff: 19					<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>Bottom quarter</th> <th>Middle quarters</th> <th>Top quarter</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>School Distribution</td> <td>2%</td> <td>7%</td> <td>25%</td> <td>67%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Australian Distribution</td> <td>25%</td> <td>25%</td> <td>25%</td> <td>25%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>					Bottom quarter	Middle quarters	Top quarter	School Distribution	2%	7%	25%	67%	Australian Distribution	25%	25%	25%	25%
	Bottom quarter	Middle quarters	Top quarter																			
School Distribution	2%	7%	25%	67%																		
Australian Distribution	25%	25%	25%	25%																		
Full-time equivalent teaching staff <sup>2</sup> : 18.2					Percentages are rounded and may not add to 100																	
Non-teaching staff: 8					<b>Students</b>																	
Full-time equivalent non-teaching staff <sup>2</sup> : 6.6					Total enrolments: 282																	
<b>Links</b>					Girls: 131																	
School website: <a href="#">Campbell Primary School</a>					Boys: 151																	
Sector, system or association website: <a href="#">ACT Education Directorate</a>					Full-time equivalent enrolments <sup>?</sup> : 281.4																	
					Indigenous students: 2%																	
					Language background other than English: 18%																	

Myschool screen shot Campbell Primary, dated 23 May 2017

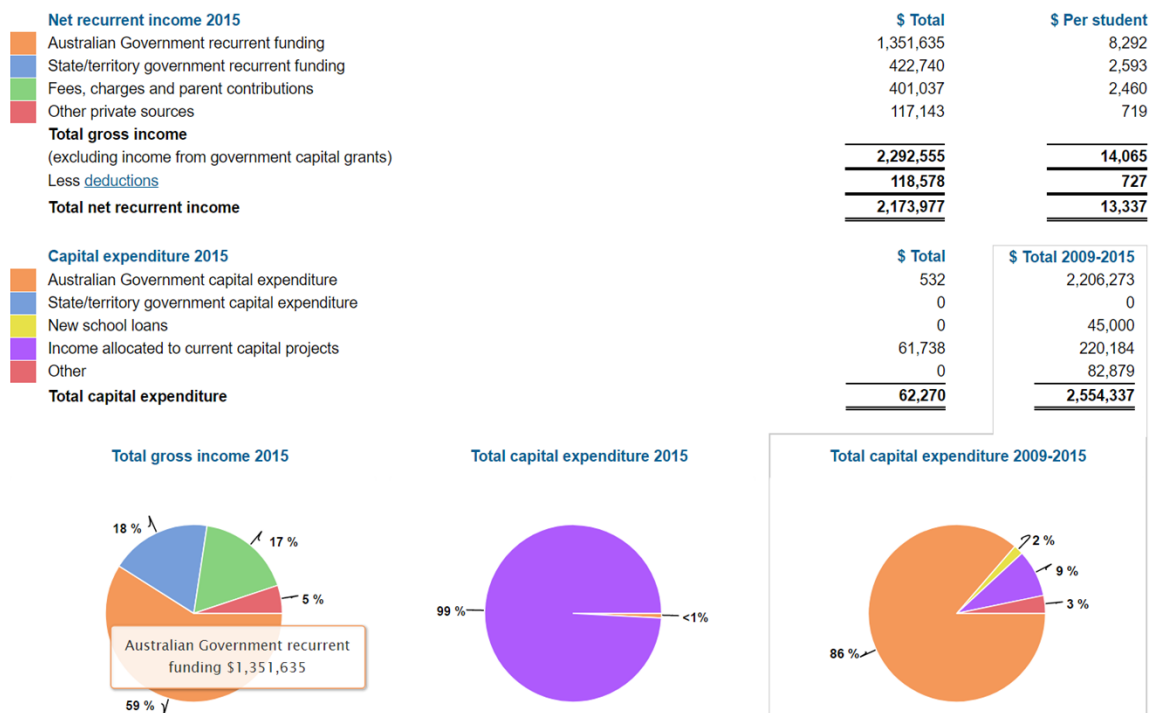


Myschool screenshot Finance, Campbell Primary, dated 23 May 2017



2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016														
<b>School facts</b>					<b>Student background</b>																	
School sector: Non-government					Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)																	
School type: Primary					School ICSEA value: 1132																	
Year range: K-6					Average ICSEA value: 1000																	
Location: Major Cities					Data source: Parent information																	
<b>School staff</b>					<b>Distribution of students <sup>2</sup></b>																	
Teaching staff: 13					<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>Bottom quarter</th> <th>Middle quarters</th> <th>Top quarter</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>School Distribution</td> <td>1%</td> <td>6%</td> <td>33%</td> <td>61%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Australian Distribution</td> <td>25%</td> <td>25%</td> <td>25%</td> <td>25%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>					Bottom quarter	Middle quarters	Top quarter	School Distribution	1%	6%	33%	61%	Australian Distribution	25%	25%	25%	25%
	Bottom quarter	Middle quarters	Top quarter																			
School Distribution	1%	6%	33%	61%																		
Australian Distribution	25%	25%	25%	25%																		
Full-time equivalent teaching staff <sup>?</sup> : 9.9					<i>Percentages are rounded and may not add to 100</i>																	
Non-teaching staff: 4					<b>Students</b>																	
Full-time equivalent non-teaching staff <sup>?</sup> : 2.3					Total enrolments: 150																	
<b>Links</b>					Girls: 76																	
School website: <a href="#">St Thomas More's Primary School</a>					Boys: 74																	
Sector, system or association website: <a href="#">Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn Catholic Education Office</a>					Full-time equivalent enrolments <sup>?</sup> : 150																	
					Indigenous students: 1%																	
					Language background other than English: 0%																	

Myschool screenshot St Thomas More taken 23 May 2017



Myschool Screenshot, St Thomas More taken 23 May 2017

