

Dear Sir or Madam,

As the body representing the parents of Blue Gum Community School (Blue Gum) and their families, we have prepared this submission to demonstrate how the current Federal Government funding severely impacts on the viability of Blue Gum.



At the heart of the funding issues for Blue Gum are the inbuilt inequities and shortfalls in the structure and application of the Socio-Economic Status (SES) funding scheme.

The Blue Gum Community Group strongly supports the principle of quality, equity, efficiency and effectiveness in public funding for government and non-government schools across Australia. Our group believes these funding principles must exist within a framework that values and enables diversity in education and the ability for all parents to exercise choice in the most appropriate model of schooling for their children.

The experience of Blue Gum's parents so far is that these funding principles are today not adhered to in a fair and equitable way.

The purpose of our submission is twofold, firstly a call for support in gaining equity and fairness in funding for Blue Gum Community School and secondly, an example of the inequity and unfairness that other schools in the ACT and elsewhere will face under the current SES funding arrangements. As such we have focussed our submission on points (a) and (b) of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

Background of Blue Gum Community School - Founding Principles and Financial Planning

Blue Gum Community School opened its preschool in 1998 and based its plans for a primary school, to be opened in January 2001, on the level of government funding that was then available for comparable schools. The school's founding principles are based on open access and non-discriminatory social justice. To fulfil this, the school was structured as a not-for-profit community school that keeps parents' fees as low as possible.

With the advent of the SES funding model, one month prior to the 'official' registration date of the primary school, the school's financial plan was severely compromised as the application of this model to Blue Gum reduced by almost half the funding it previously thought available. This has been an incredible burden for the school to carry. The constant financial concerns are necessarily a distraction for school management and parents' volunteer efforts that should rightly be directed more fully to the educational outcomes of the students rather than the survival of the school.

Blue Gum is struggling to survive as a low-fee, open-access community school. The simple answer would seem to be to raise school fees. Yet we know that this would force the majority of families to leave, as most Blue Gum families are low to middle income families. It would also totally change the character of the school into an elitist and exclusive boutique school, which would run totally counter to its founding principles.

Current situation

Despite this financial discrimination, the school has gone from strength to strength, rapidly growing in enrolments and reputation each year. It has only been through the incredible and constant effort, enthusiasm, drive, persistence, sacrifice and goodwill of the staff and parents that this unique school continues to deliver tangible, recognised results for its students.

But for how long? The staff cannot be expected to continue working at the high level they currently do, while receiving less remuneration than their government schools counterparts. Our parents certainly cannot afford to pay even higher fees than they currently do to compensate for a funding shortfall that no other comparable school in the ACT is required to endure.

Flaws and inequities in the SES funding model and how it is applied to Blue Gum Community School

The SES funding scheme came into force in December 2000. Due to the January 2001 official registration date of Blue Gum's primary school, the school was given no funding option other than SES model. This is despite that fact that the primary school was legitimately operational prior to the registration date. The registration date was simply an administrative milestone not an operational reality.

However, this administrative milestone has had a profound impact on Blue Gum because it left the school with no option other than to accept the SES funding model. A funding model which cuts Blue Gum's funding to 58% of the level of our neighbouring comparable schools.

All other ACT non-Government schools were offered the option of remaining "funding maintained". Blue Gum is the only school in the ACT which is forced to adopt SES funding.

Analysis of the choices other schools in the ACT shows that all but two (out of 42) non-government schools in the ACT have chosen to stay 'funding maintained' rather than risking disadvantage under the SES model.

The reality for Blue Gum (and any future new independent school in the ACT) is that despite the fact that the socio-economic makeup of our parent base is no different from that of neighbouring schools, our school receives around \$1600 per student p.a. less than comparable ACT non-government schools. This is very unfair.

The Connors Report (released in 2003) and commissioned by the ACT Government into ACT Education Funding examined the Federal Government's method of funding schools. Dr Connors strongly criticised the SES funding scheme, labelling it a "flawed" scheme for the ACT. In her Report, Connors made the following recommendation (No. 7): "*The ACT Government should reject the adoption of the Commonwealth's flawed SES-based funding scheme as the basis for the ACT Government's funding of non-government schools.*" The ACT Government took Connors' advice and rejected this "flawed" SES funding scheme as the basis for its funding.

The SES funding model does not work in the ACT because it makes assumptions about parents' wealth based on the residential address of the parents. This methodology does not work in the ACT because families with all levels of income are equally distributed throughout Canberra's suburbs.

The families at Blue Gum Community School are no different from the families at neighbouring schools which receive significantly more funding than Blue Gum.

If this funding model continues without addressing the reality of Canberra's mixed socio-economic suburbs, parent's choice of low-fee non-government schools in Canberra will cease to exist.

The need for a thorough review

The Federal Government promised a review of the SES model at the end of the first funding quadrennium when first implemented four years ago. This has not happened.

During the past four years, through ongoing lobbying of the Federal Government bureaucracy and Ministers' by parents and school management, we have been repeatedly told by the Department of Education Science & Training that our school's situation could not be looked at until after a review had taken place. However, recently we have been notified of the school's funding level for the next quadrennium with no public notice of any review having taken place.

Our parent community finds it hard to understand how the Federal Government can be serious about the effectiveness of accountability arrangements for its funding model when it has failed to carry out the promised review after the first funding quadrennium.

We strongly urge the Government to comprehensively review the SES funding scheme so that any anomalies and inequities such as that of Blue Gum, and the ACT, can be identified and fixed.

The way forward

As a successful, well regarded, low-fee not-for-profit community school, Blue Gum has been acknowledged both nationally and internationally. One example of this is by Blue Gum's inclusion as one of only six ACT schools, and approximately 200 schools Australia-wide invited to participate in a two year Enterprise Education Action Research Project, primarily aimed at upper-primary and secondary students, commissioned by the Federal Education Department.

As parents, we are very proud of our school and its successful work with children from wide and varied backgrounds, in particular after they have come to us from other educational settings. We would welcome the Senate Committee to visit our school, so you can see the wonderful, caring environment that has been established and the sound educational outcomes being delivered to children destined to be the adults of Australia in the twenty-first century. Alternatively we would be happy to arrange a delegation of parents to meet with the Committee should you seek additional detail to this submission.

It is so important for the community that this very special school continues to exist and other innovative schools are allowed to establish. This will only be achieved through fair and equitable funding being provided by the Australian Government in partnership with state and territory governments and the communities they serve.

Your Sincerely,

Corri Hakaraia
Blue Gum Community Group

25 June 2004