

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into Commonwealth Funding for Schools

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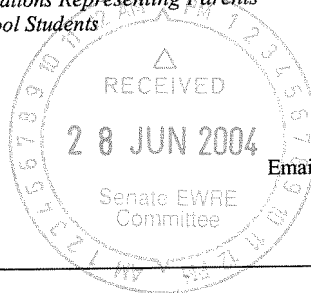
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Submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee on the principles of the Government's schools funding package and the effect of these principles on

- (a) The capacity of all schools to meet current and future school needs and to achieve the Adelaide Declaration (1999) on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century;
- (b) The role and responsibility of the Australian Government, in partnership with state and territory governments, for quality and equity in public funding for government and non-government schools across Australia and for promoting efficiency and effectiveness in the allocation of public funds for schooling, including effects on enrolment trends in the government and non-government sectors;
- (c) The effectiveness of accountability arrangements for state, territory and Federal governments funding of government and non-government schools; and,
- (d) The application of the framework of principles for the funding of schools that has been endorsed by state and territory governments through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs.

The Australian Parents Council (APC)

The APC is the national peak parents' organisation representing parents of children attending non-government schools in Australia. We draw the attention of the Inquiry to the commitment and contribution of those parents who choose non-government schools for their children, sometimes at great financial sacrifice.

The APC was founded in 1962 at a time when non-government school students were denied any public funding support for their school education. The APC seeks

- to achieve equity in the distribution of government funds allocated to schooling,
- to foster choice in schooling within and across both the government and non-government schooling sectors,
- to promote quality in school education.

APC policies are based on the principles that:

- parents are the primary educators of their children;
- parents have the right and responsibility to choose schools which they consider best suit the needs of their children;
- all children are entitled to share equitably in public funds allocated for schooling.

In the distribution of public funds for school education:

- every non-government school child is entitled to a basic funding entitlement for general recurrent purposes, calculated as a realistic proportion of the true average cost of educating a child in a government school,

- plus additional funding for individual additional educational needs, taking into account the needs of the particular school community,
- plus the right to share in targeted and other available program funding on the basis of need.

Climate of the Senate Inquiry

There is no doubt that excellent school education, adequately funded, is critically important to the future of all Australians.

However, APC observes that the current Senate inquiry is being conducted in a climate of

- emphasis on Commonwealth funding which represents only 21% (\$5 billion) of public funding for school education (the balance of \$20 billion is supplied by State Governments);
- ongoing division in views about approaches to funding;
- disagreement about the roles of the Commonwealth and State governments;
- a perception that funding is insufficient to achieve the National Goals for Schooling;
- failure of Governments to account for the total, real costs of school education; and
- constant criticism of Commonwealth funding allocations to non-government school students along with perceptions of a lack of accountability in non-government schools.

An examination of the funding principles of the Commonwealth in this climate, without being able to examine the adequacy and transparency of States' funding for school education, is unlikely to advance the possibility of agreed, equitable principles and allocation mechanisms for the public funding of school education.

There appears to be no discernible movement towards a collaborative States/Commonwealth agreement about a way forward in the provision of adequate public funding for all students. There is also little attempt by the States to correct the commonly held misapprehension that non-government school students receive more public funding than their government school counterparts.

The Way Forward

The way forward for the distribution of public funding of school education must be by collaborative and agreed funding arrangements between the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments.

a) APC believes that there should be a legislated agreement between the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments in keeping with the shared responsibility for the funding of school education.

In reaching such agreement there must be consultation with the major stakeholders in education, especially parents who, along with teachers, are essential guardians of school education.

At present, parent representatives are excluded from any funding policy making bodies. The APC is unaware of what might be happening within MCEETYA as to the adequate and collaborative resourcing of school education in Australia. MCEETYA consists solely of school authorities and Government representatives, does not report publicly on their deliberations and excludes input from all other major stakeholders in education.

b) Transparent and consistent figures should be publicly available about the total, actual cost of government school education.

At present it is impossible to know the truth of the situation concerning the cost of educating children in the government sector. The Productivity Commission Report appears to produce the most reliable figures. These are considerably in excess of figures said to be the average cost of educating children in government schools.

The 2004 Productivity Commission Report says that the average cost of government school education in 2000-01 was \$9800.00 per student. Considering the elements of government school cost omitted from the calculation this still appears to be understated by up to \$1000 per student. When State governments calculate government school cost at the State level, they adopt their own assessments of that cost, excluding and manipulating the figures as their government sees fit. These figures continue to exclude contributions, fees and fund raising by parents.

Arriving at the cost of school education for non-government school students appears to be much more transparent given the level of information provided to the Commonwealth through annual questionnaire data, the inclusion of all parent paid fees and other contributions, and the known level of Commonwealth and State funding for non-government school students.

c) Public funding for school education should be distributed through an approach which is consistent across both government and non-government school sectors.

If the SES system of ranking non-government schools for funding purposes is a fair, transparent and equitable system for the funding of non-government school students according to need, it should be applied to the government sector of schooling. There should be a public acknowledgement that, across both the government and non-government schooling sectors there is a considerable differential in educational need and in the capacity of school communities to contribute resources.

d) The funding of school education cannot be considered in isolation from the outcomes of schooling and those other elements which create effective schools.

Some of these elements are: creative and innovative leadership, teacher availability, teacher quality, a greater measure of autonomy for schools in the hiring and deployment of staff, industrial peace - to name a few.

A closer participation and engagement of parents and families with their schools has also been shown to contribute to school effectiveness and improved learning outcomes for students. Parents and families need to know and understand school goals and 21st Century schooling needs to be able to support and encourage their children in optimising schooling outcomes.

The culture of schools needs to be welcoming to parents and families and processes put in place to forge effective, sustainable family/school partnerships in the interests of children's learning.

e) Levels of funding must be adequate to ensure that all children are sufficiently resourced to meet the National Goals for Schooling.

If governments are unable or unwilling to increase public funding allocations to achieve this for all students, then a needs based approach to its distribution must be applied to all school education in the interests of equity for all. Those families able to contribute to their child's education in the public sector should do so - as they do now to a greater or lesser extent, evidenced by the recent publication of fee levels in public schools.

f) Parents' choice of a school for their children is a fundamental right and all parents should be able to access that choice.

Governments should facilitate choice in keeping with their responsibility to ensure adequate education for all children.

Choice in school education can be predicted to continue to grow. Reasons for that growth include higher levels of parental education and the recognition that education is a key to the future employability and resourcefulness of their children. Declining numbers of children in families and the growing capacity of parents to pay will also dictate choice.

Governments must consider choice and access when considering the future and quality of schools which they both own and run on highly centralist systems. Is this the preferred future for schools which each cater to different communities?

g) Accountability

Non-government schools are highly accountable to both Commonwealth and State governments as well as to a range of other stakeholders – parents, students, statutory authorities and government agencies. Total income and expenditure in non-government schools is reported in detail to the Commonwealth. All parent input is reported, not only the fees paid but also all other input from parent fund raising and other contribution. The value of contributed services is also reported. Similar detail is not available from the government school sector and should be.

Additionally, non-government schools are required to undergo a rigorous registration procedure every five years, a process of accountability which does not apply to the government schools. A registration process for government schools may help foster excellence in education and create a culture of high expectations and outcomes for all students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the APC calls on the Senate Inquiry to acknowledge the contribution of non-government school parents to the Australian economy and that non-government schools in Australia contribute to the quality and effectiveness of Australian schools.

The APC recommends that the Senate Inquiry make every effort to recommend a fair and just way forward towards collaborative, agreed funding arrangements for school education.

These arrangements should not:

- seek to deprive non-government school students of their right to share equitably in public funds for school education or seek to diminish the current funding allocations for any non-government school student ;
- lessen the right of parents to choose a school for their children or their responsibility for the education of their children;
- discriminate against those parents who choose schools other than government schools for the school education of their children.

These arrangements should recommend

- a process for national collaboration and agreement on schools funding;
- increased public investment in school education to achieve the National Goals for Schooling for every student;
- that State Governments maintain fair and just levels of public funding for every non-government school student;
- participation by all education stakeholders, not just governments and bureaucracies in discussions about funding mechanisms and allocations.

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