

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into Commonwealth funding for schools

Submission no: 59

Received: 13/07/2004

Submitter: Sharryn Brownlee
President

Organisation: The Federation of Parents and Citizens'
Associations of NSW

Address: PO Box 789
Darlinghurst 1300

Phone: 02 9080 2366

Fax: 02 9080 2364

Email: mail@pandc.org.au

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into Commonwealth funding for schools

Submission no: 59

Received: 13/07/2004

Submitter: Sharryn Brownlee
President

Organisation: The Federation of Parents and Citizens'
Associations of NSW

Address: PO Box 789
Darlinghurst 1300

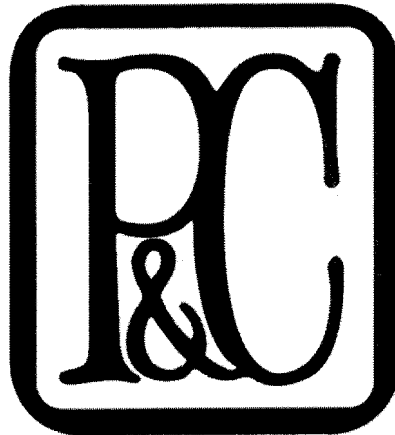
Phone: 02 9080 2366

Fax: 02 9080 2364

Email: mail@pandc.org.au

**Federation of Parents and Citizens
Associations of New South Wales**

SUBMISSION



To the

**Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and
Education Committee**

Regarding

**Inquiry into Commonwealth funding for
schools**

PREAMBLE

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South Wales is committed to a free public education system which is open to all people irrespective of culture, gender, academic ability and socio-economic class and empowers students to control their own lives and be contributing members of society.

This commitment is based on the belief that:

- ◇ All students have the capacity to learn;
- ◇ The Government has prime responsibility to provide an education system open to all which is free and secular;
- ◇ Schools should be structured to meet the needs of individual students and should respect the knowledge those students bring to school and build on that knowledge to foster their understanding about the world.

Parents, as partners in the education process, have a right and a responsibility to play an active role in the education of their children. P&C Federation and its representatives share a responsibility of ensuring representative decision making for the benefit of all students. P&C Federation's annual conference, attended by representatives of its 2100 affiliate associations, develops policy which is energetically promoted by P&C Federation's democratically elected Council.

Submission to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee Inquiry into Commonwealth funding for schools

Introduction

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW welcomes this opportunity to offer its views about the Inquiry into Funding of Government schools.

We have prepared a submission for this Senate Inquiry because NSW government schools are profoundly affected by the Federal Government's funding policies. The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW strongly supports the principles of social justice and equity. Although our sphere of activity is predominantly with the field of education, the Federation raises concerns about all matters relating to the health and well-being of children.

This Federation represents more than 2100 government school parents' organisations across the length and breadth of New South Wales. Its policies and positions are determined by the Federation's Annual Conference to which all member associations are invited and funded to attend. P&C Federation's policy in relation to school funding, which has been defined by successive Annual Conferences, reads:

Governments have an obligation to provide and maintain a government school system of the highest possible standard. Their sole financial responsibility is to that system.

P&C Federation's policy in relation to the issue of funding for non-government schools reads:

Federation recognises the democratic right of people to educate their children as they choose provided that certain strictly defined and enforced standards of education are maintained, but insists that non-government schools neither be established by nor supported from government funds. While recognising the value of diversity, Federation considers that flexibility and diversity within the government school system is more in the national interest than is the promotion of non-government schools.

Federation believes that governments should not be in the business of funding non-government schools, and especially not the wealthier private schools.

Thus the position of this Federation is clear. It has been determined democratically and is stated openly. We contend that increases in private school enrolments via the provision of generously enhanced subsidies and a reduction of funds to government schools have resulted in the abolition of the New Schools Policy and the introduction of the Enrolment Benchmark Adjustment.

The importance of the Adelaide Declaration of the National Goals of Schooling.

The Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling are important. The Federation of Parents and Citizens' agrees that "Australia's future depends upon each citizen having the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills and values for a productive and rewarding life in an educated, just and open society. High quality schooling is central to achieving this vision."

However, the Federation asserts that the Federal Government's funding and resourcing policies have deliberately eroded the capacity for public school systems to deliver the quality educational experience that Australians expect to form the foundation of our society.

Governments set the public policies that foster the pursuit of excellence, enable a diverse range of educational choices and aspirations, safeguard the entitlement of all young people to high quality schooling, promote the economic use of public resources, and uphold the contribution of schooling to a socially cohesive and culturally rich society.

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' asserts in the strongest terms that the Commonwealth Government's support for non-government schools should not be to the detriment of its responsibility for

maintaining and advancing a strong and socially representative public education system. Public school systems should not be considered the resource for residualised and marginalised members of the community, but should set the standards by which other provision is judged. The levels of financial and educational accountability, connectedness to the community, and equality of outcomes modelled through the NSW DET equity strategies (Priority Schools Funding Programs) are worldwide best practice. These are models which should be actively supported through Federal Government policies, which will provide a mechanism for the implementation of the National Goals.

The achievement of these common and agreed national goals entails a commitment to collaboration for the purposes of:

- *further strengthening schools as learning communities where teachers, students and their families work in partnership with business, industry and the wider community*
- *enhancing the status and quality of the teaching profession*
- *continuing to develop curriculum and related systems of assessment, accreditation and credentialling that promote quality and are nationally recognised and valued*
- *increasing public confidence in school education through explicit and defensible standards that guide improvement in students' levels of educational achievement and through which the effectiveness, efficiency and equity of schooling can be measured and evaluated.*

We are concerned that the Commonwealth's desire to associate performance targets with these goals may not be in the best interests of school students.

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' of NSW argues that public schools are the primary instrument for the transmission of values, and the mechanism through which social justice may be distributed to members of Australian society. We support the National goals, but are concerned that without a fair funding model, public school students will be disenfranchised in the decades to come.

Increase in Non-government school enrolments

P&C Federation believes the motivation for these funding increases is the Government's intention to drive parents from the government school system. This motivation is especially apparent in the application of the regressive and punitive Enrolment Benchmark Adjustment (EBA) which has caused under-funding of additional enrolments in government schools and divisiveness. The EBA effectively allows the Government to provide fewer funds per government school student than the legislation provides for. This policy ensures that as the share of students attending non-government schools rises in relation to those attending government schools, grants to the state are cut by half the AGSRC amount for each student making up the difference.

The General Recurrent Grants Program provides per capita funding for government school systems. It already allows the Commonwealth to reduce funding to government school systems should enrolments fall. The EBA does more than this. It actually reduces Commonwealth funding for the students remaining in the government school system if that system's market share falls even if enrolments in that system increase.

The incontestable fact is that provision of resources to non-government schools does not enhance the quality of education for the educationally and socio-economically disadvantaged in any demonstrable way. This is especially true since the adoption by the Federal Government's Enrolment Benchmark Adjustment (EBA).

A "Needs" Basis of School Funding

Specific purpose funding for schools was for almost 30 years based on the needs of the schools to be funded. The needs basis of school funding from the Commonwealth was largely responsible for the political settlement around education funding that has endured until recent times. The balance of need between government and non-government schools has altered dramatically during this period to the point where government schools are now the resource poor in relation to most private schools.

The Federal Government has departed from provision of funds on a needs basis and is moving towards a method of funding of individual students that is anathema to notions of equity. There is no way to move away from a needs basis of funding and maintain any semblance of equity for school funding.

The Socio-economic Status Measure

The Government's school funding method disregards all sources of private income to schools even though these schools, before receipt of any government assistance, may expend more per student than is spent on government school students. Because no school receives reduced funding under the system, the method will deliver funds to schools with no demonstrable need for them. Instead, it distributes diminishing public monies which should be applied to the amelioration of socio-economic disadvantage to the more affluent sections of the community.

Secondly, the proposal to base non-government school funding on a measurement of the socio-economic status of a school's students is flawed. The measurement is based on the census collection district in which students live. Because it is dependent on averages it cannot distinguish between the richest household in the district and the poorest. Many elite private schools draw from wealthy families who live in rural areas that experience low average incomes and which are otherwise disadvantaged. The system cannot distinguish between needy students and wealthy students from the same area.

In addition, some of these schools actively seek students who attract special funding via offers of scholarships. Frequently, they select students from disadvantaged communities or who suffer a disability but because of their selection criteria the students selected are in all other respects suitable. They are usually easy to teach, exhibit few learning or behaviour problems and are often from middle class homes. The point is that there is little basis for such students to attract additional funding and their enrolment provides little evidence of the school's commitment to inclusion.

P&C Federation believes that the Commonwealth's funding system represents an attempt to residualise public education. It appears that the thrust of the Government's policies on schooling is to drive all but the poor and otherwise disadvantaged from public schools. We believe public schools are essential to the maintenance and development of a happy society and a vibrant society. Public education is not a "safety net" provision for those who cannot help themselves to better offerings. This approach is exacerbating class-based divisions within communities that are destructive and threaten the egalitarianism on which we pride ourselves. The creation of social divisions on this basis is a social evil that should not be countenanced.

The Commonwealth, through emphasis on the specious notion of "school choice", advantageous funding of private schools and an incremental but undeniable withdrawal of support for public education is foisting a vast social experiment on Australia's school children. It is creating a market for schools in a way that ensures government schools cannot win.

Educational Accountability

The 1996 Act provided for educational accountability on a basis agreed by states and territories together with the Federal Government. The 2000 Bill removed all negotiated accountability and replaced it with any report or measure the Federal Minister, acting alone, requires. This represents little more than a crude attempt to drive Federal education policies which are avowedly hostile to government schools through all states and territories.

The provisions provided no additional conditions in return for the financial windfall disbursed to these schools.

Accountability

Government schools in New South Wales are subject to stringent and intrusive accountability measures in relation to all students in their care. These measures comprise the annual publication of school annual reports in which all aspects of school activity are publicly reported. These reports include financial accountability for all resource use by the school, including resources from community and private sources. The reports also require reporting of aggregated academic results against statewide averages based on student performance in the following tests:

- ◆ Basic Skills Testing for all Years 3 and 5 students.
- ◆ Year 7 English Language and Literacy Assessments for all Year 7 students (with follow-up assessments for Year 8 students).

- ◆ Year 7 Secondary Numeracy Assessment Program for all students (with the possibility of follow-up assessments for Year 8 students).
- ◆ Skills based School Certificate examinations for all Year 10 students in English Literacy, Mathematics, Science, History, Geography and Civics and Citizenship (to be fully phased in by 2002).
- ◆ Higher School Certificate results.

Public schools are required to justify their actions on the basis that they are funded predominantly from the public purse. In addition to these school-by-school requirements, the Department of Education and Training, being the authority that administers these schools, is required to account for the activities of public schools annually in the following forms:

- ◆ Department of Education and Training Annual Report;
- ◆ Reports to the Parliament of New South Wales detailing Basic Skills Test, School Certificate and Higher School Certificate test results required by 1998 amendments to the Education Act;
- ◆ Provision of information for use in the annual Productivity Commission report on government service provision and;
- ◆ Accountability conditions specified in return for specific purpose grants for public schools, including reporting on agreed terms for the National Report on Schooling in Australia,

Again, these accountability measures are required on the basis that government schools are funded from the public purse.

The *States Grants (Primary and Secondary Education Assistance) Bill 2000* has dramatically increased the public funding of private schools. However, the Bill requires accountability only for the use of those funds rather than for the entirety of funds available to private schools. This situation is dramatically different to accountability measures applied to government schools where all funds regardless of their source has to be publicly accounted for.

P&C Federation believes this situation to be unfair. It appears that the Commonwealth is intent on shielding private schools from the same scrutiny it, and state governments, insist government schools should submit to. Importantly, onerous, perhaps misleading, educational accountability requirements necessitate "warts-and-all" disclosures on the part of government schools.

Non-government schools, on the other hand, are able to make any claims about the quality of the highly subsidised educational provision they make without the need to provide the information necessary for parents and other members of the public to verify those claims. Consequently we demand equal treatment for all sectors of school education.

Use of Average Government School Recurrent Costs

High standards of accountability are expected of public schools but non-government schools are also funded from the public purse. On average non-government schools receive about half their funding from the Federal Government and, significant assistance from state governments. The majority, including Catholic systemic schools receive more than 80 per cent of their funding from public sources but they are not equally accountable for the use of these funds and will never be until they are made to share fully the public purposes of schooling which currently find complete expression in government schools alone.

Government schools, unlike private schools, provide universal education. They educate all children who wish to enrol. It is their inclusiveness that makes them unique. The community expects government schools to provide education of the highest quality to all students because the community believes this mission is of vital importance and that the students of these schools are worthy of the effort regardless of the religion, wealth or background of their parents.

Private schools are free to select students they wish to enrol. They can tailor their service provision to specific interests or attributes, such as religious beliefs, high academic achievement or socio-economic

status. Further, they outsource the education of children who are difficult to teach, from different religious groups or who suffer disabilities to government schools. There is little justification for basing funding of non-government schools on Average Government School Recurrent Costs (AGSRC) because of the out-sourcing of educational provision practiced by private schools. The extent to which the AGSRC should be used needs to be based on the extent to which non-government schools adhere to inclusive enrolment practices. For most non-government schools, the rate should be in the order of 0.75 of the AGSRC but for many of the more exclusive schools, the rate should be significantly less.

Choice

"Choice" in the context of the Federal Government's terminology is synonymous with free market competition. An ideological preference for competition is not to be confused with the equitable availability of appropriate diversity which is an aim of schooling. The unsupported *a priori* assumption that "choice" leads to diversity which, in turn, leads to improved outcomes is challenged and refuted throughout this submission. The enthusiastic espousal of the "freedom of the individual" under market capitalism is, at best, overstated and is usually illusory. The reality of modern capitalism is that the individual conducts transactions with large, often massive, and powerful corporations which are not accountable and not with independent traders or small firms. The withdrawal of the state from its responsibility to protect the individual from the excessive power of the provider in such circumstances together with the rejection of collective efforts to ensure balance in such transactions has coincided with a decline in the power of democracy and a rapid decline in the tolerance of individual difference and caring for individual needs.

This situation is illustrated by the Commonwealth's intentions for the provision of schooling in Australia. The attack on public education is made in terms of its alleged inability to provide for the diverse needs of students. Yet the contrary is true. The greatest strength of public schools is their collective commitment to the needs of individuals, to the provision of excellent education appropriate to the needs of every child regardless of culture, class, gender, personality or ability. Public schools are democratic sites characterised by guaranteed rights of participation by parents and students through and policies to promote parent/teacher partnerships. In public schools these policies are manifested in discipline codes negotiated within system-wide guarantees of rights and responsibilities, procedures to guarantee fair hearing of all grievances and explicit means of appealing against decisions that may be to the detriment of individuals or with which an individual may simply not agree.

Contrast with the private school sector could not be more marked. The ethos of private schooling is founded on the rejection of non-conforming individuals. Antiquated authoritarian structures and discipline deny participation, natural justice and individual autonomy. One only has to glance at the astounding sameness of elite private schools as well as the uniformity of Catholic systemic schools, which constitute the vast bulk of non-government schools, to realise that privatisation of schools is the enemy of diversity and dynamism. Private schools market and deliver uniformity across sectors and over time to the detriment of individuals.

This organisation has been the champion of the aspirations and needs of individuals since its establishment in 1922. It utterly rejects, on behalf of itself and public education, the claim that this mantle is more properly borne by the private sector.

Choice derived from market theory is not choice at all, but one more example of language captured for political purposes. Market choice in education works *against* real choice and *against* the interests of parents and students. Parents seek to maximise *real* choice within practical limits. The most important of these limits is the duty of each generation to ensure effective and appropriate education for *all* of its children.

Distinctions between government and non-government schools are increasingly outdated

The main distinction between government and non-government schools is one of accountability. Non-government schools are *not* accountable for their actions, for the performance of their students, for the quality of educational service they provide or for the use of the public monies received.

Accountability for decisions which affect the educational opportunities of students is, however, an important feature of government schools and systems. Government education systems operate under public policies and procedures. Decisions taken by schools or systems and disputed by parents may be reviewed beyond the school gate and the administrators who make them are held responsible for those decisions. Ultimately, the elected Minister for Education in the State concerned must take responsibility for decisions taken by a government education system.

In stark contrast to the situation found in private schools, students cannot be removed from government school systems simply because they do not fit in, or because they have different values and attitudes to those of school administrators, or because they are not sufficiently successful in their studies. Government schools are required by legislation to assist students from all backgrounds and who face all manner of difficulty in their lives. This ensures that all Australian children have access to education and is the foremost protection for each against wrong or malicious decisions.

The exclusion of difficult, troubled or merely different students is, however, a defining feature of private schools. They are *exclusive*. Private schools are under no obligation to assist all students to achieve the best they can, merely those they allow to enrol and to remain enrolled. Nor are they accountable for the fairness of decisions which affect the welfare and future of individual students at any level beyond the school gate. Parents cannot challenge unfair or discriminatory decisions made by non-government schools in the same way government school parents can. They are obliged to go to the courts to seek redress, further disadvantaging all but the economic elites of Australian society. They can only take their children elsewhere, whether the decisions predicating exclusion are just or unjust and regardless of the negative impact such moves may have on the children concerned.

Conclusion

This Federal government has implemented policy that is actively hostile to government schools. Not only does it provide the means for the Government to disregard the demonstrable needs of government schools, it punishes them for the success of its own policy of driving the public out of public school. The Federation of Parents and Citizens' of NSW asserts that in the interests of equity and supporting the National Goals of Schooling:

- the Enrolment Benchmark Adjustment should be abolished
- the New Schools Policy should be re-established
- that greater financial and educational accountability mechanisms for non-government schools be instituted
- that Federal Equity funding return to specific targets:
 - rural and remote students
 - students from low socio-economic communities
 - indigenous students
 - students with a disability
 - students from non-English speaking backgrounds.