

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into Commonwealth Funding for Schools

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A paper for consideration by the Senate Select Committee of Inquiry into the Commonwealth funding of Schools in Australia

“Towards improvement : Principles for Commonwealth funding of Schools in Australia”



Introduction

The watershed event in Commonwealth funding of schools occurred in the mid 1970s when the Commonwealth Government decided to provide recurrent funding to what were called “non government schools”. From that time there has been almost continuous debate about three aspects of this funding viz

- (i) its relationship with State funding
- (ii) the proportions of Commonwealth funding going to state and non-state schools
- (iii) the principles underpinning the calculation and distribution of Commonwealth funds to schools.

More latterly there has been increasing attention paid to accountability especially through the mechanism of Annual National Report and the National Goals for schooling in Australia. To date, this accountability, and the increasing refinements of it being pursued by MCEETYA, have not proved overly-problematic for the schools.

With respect to the future Commonwealth funding of schools, this Inquiry represents a window of opportunity to reconsider not only the principles under-pinning such funding but also the significant contextual changes that have occurred in Australian schooling in the last 30 years. Prominent among such changes are issues related to technology; the widening gap between rich and poor; globalisation and the press of economic rationalism; the movement from segregation to inclusion in pedagogical practices in schools; the research which indicates that it is individual teachers not schools, that make for improvement in students’ performances; the move to “multiple pathways” in Senior years.

(In this context one notes the Forum being conducted by the Melbourne Institute in August which seek to explore the connection between schools’ funding and schools’ performances).

It would seem then that any reconsideration of principles must occur in a new context which will influence the development of such principles.

Former principles

Basically there has been a limited number of funding principles applying in various strengths in the last 30 years. These can be listed as:

1. base grant (“every pupil deserves some funding”)
2. needs grant (“some students need extra help”)
3. schools have differential private incomes and expenditures (Education Resource Index; AGSRC.)
4. socio-economic status of students’ families (SES funding)
5. parental choice

Principles 3 & 4 might be seen as 'micro-principles' i.e. principles which alone or together, help distribute large amounts of money apportioned by applying the macro principles 1 & 2. The micro and macro principles all tend to be economic principles, though 'needs' is often determined on some educational basis.

Principle No. 5 "parental choice" owes its origins to what might be called social policy. Various Governments at Federal level have regarded it as important that parents have a right to choose schools appropriate to the needs of their children (including faith based schools) and this principle has exerted its particular influence in the considerations surrounding funding of schools.

Some Current Considerations

The changing contexts, roles and needs of schools in the last 30 years, would suggest that the Federal Government now faces serious issues with respect to its principles for funding schools in Australia.

Firstly, there is the issue of QUANTUM i.e. what level of funds does a particular school need to operate effectively in the new and challenging contexts mentioned earlier?

Secondly, should any (school) community be required to contribute funds in addition to those provided by Federal & State Governments? Currently Governments at both levels are embroiled in annual public debates about the differential funding levels of Government and Non-Government schools, and about the perceived inadequacies and inequities of such weighting factors as ERI and SES. In addition, there are the ongoing disputes between the two levels of Government regarding their funding obligations.

Thirdly, the recently changed tax arrangements and distributions to States (particularly of the GST) raises new possibilities for funding schools, especially in the light of projected significant surpluses.

Fourthly, the increased collaboration of States in the MCEETYA arrangements may well produce economies of scale which could avoid 'duplicatroy drag' in expenditures in current schooling systems.

Towards a Brave New World

The Senate Select Committee should develop a new set of funding principles which flow from and support clearly articulated social policy. Education is a right for all citizens, but that right cannot be exercised fully unless a suite of enabling policies is in place. In this context, consideration could be given to a principle which applies the same level of funding to comparable schools, regardless of whether they are government or non-government. Comparability here could be measured by a number of factors which are recognised as educationally significant (eg. Complexity of school P-12 vs. primary only; percentage of students with disabilities; indigenous enrolments; and other factors).

In a multi-cultural, multi-faith Australia, the teaching of religious values should be encouraged, and certainly should not be a reason why any school is denied the full support from Governments to enact its educational mission. Accountability for Government funds should ensure that Government policies and agreed priorities are being met by each school. Attention could be paid to the funding in New Zealand of 'special

character' schools which meet such requirements and which are funded on a par with Government Schools.

Finally there needs to be a new partnership between the Federal and State Governments, based on new taxation sharing arrangements, which will obviate the need for acrimonious and public debate about which Government pays for which schooling costs. The current funding principles do not address this partnership model, and hence can at times be counterproductive. A new partnership, with new principles which seek to eliminate or minimise differences within and across the various systems of schooling, would place schooling in Australia on a surer and more effective and efficient foundation than currently exists.

A summary of a suite of proposed principles for funding schools in Australia (with no order of priority)

1. That the allocation of taxes, derived from income and goods and services, to education, by the Federal and State Governments, be open and transparent.
2. That funding of schools be premised on agreed social policies, which protect basic human rights and promote equity, access and effective participation for students.
3. That funding of schools be based largely on a set of **educational** factors (complexity characteristics of schools) which produce the same levels of funding for comparable schools in all the 'systems' of schooling in Australia.
4. That a new partnership be developed between the Federal and State Governments so that the total recurrent cost of schooling in Australia is met by Governments in the interest of the common good of all Australia.
5. That the principle of parental choice be preserved and its enactment enabled by new funding arrangements.
6. That mutual accountabilities, involving Governments, schools and the Australian taxpayers, be developed so that educational and financial efficiencies and effectiveness are achieved.
7. That bi-partisan support, (within and across levels of Governments) be sought so that educational planning can proceed on a stable economic and educational basis, with obvious cost-effectiveness.
8. That the current system of 'base plus needs' recurrent funding be replaced by a more integrated process (See principle 3).

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