

Submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee on the Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017

We are making this submission as the parents of three young children at St Thomas More's Primary School in Campbell ACT 2612.

What we ask be changed in the Bill and its implementation is its inequitable treatment of Catholic system schools compared with public schools in the same area, whose students come from the same socioeconomic category.

We ask the Committee to propose amendments to reverse the Commonwealth Government's proposed cuts to Catholic schools in the ACT. We are writing to you because we have 3 young children at St Thomas More's Catholic Primary school - Gabrielle, Leah and Dominic - and we are greatly worried about how the school can continue to deliver a quality, value-based education to our children with a focus on literacy and STEM if the funding cuts are not reversed.

Urgent changes to the announced funding proposals are necessary to prevent the major, unfair anomaly of children and teachers at St Thomas More's primary having their funding cut as part of the cuts to ACT Catholic schools' funding from \$109m in 2017 to 107m in 2027 - while Australian Government funding to ACT government schools - like Campbell Primary, which shares an oval with St Thomas More's - will rise by 145% over this same period.

The basis for the proposed cuts to St Thomas More's primary is the socioeconomic status of the suburb of Campbell. As a result, in public commentary and Government statements on the Bill, there has been a direct comparison drawn between the socioeconomic status of Campbell with the area around the Shore elite private school in Sydney. The relevant comparison should, instead, be with the primary school across the oval from St Thomas More's - Campbell Primary.

The elite Shore school bears no similarity with the simple facilities and austere financial situation of St Thomas More's primary. The only similarity may be the dedication and vocational commitment of St Thomas More's teaching staff - who are exceptional.

Campbell Primary, on the other hand, has broadly similar, if larger, facilities to those at St Thomas More's. Both schools are simple, with basic but functional facilities, each with a new hall funded by the Gillard Government. Neither bears any resemblance to the very well-endowed private schools that may be considering things like additional tennis centres or indoor equestrian centres.

We would welcome Campbell Primary receiving additional funding, however, fairness to the students at St Thomas More's requires a similar increase to this school - and the present bill proposes a cut.

It is a classic exercise in misdirection to say that the cuts the Bill proposes are not the issue and point instead to the way that the Catholic Education Office disburses the funding. The Bill is about the Commonwealth funding allocated to schools based on socioeconomic status, and it is here the inequity between catholic and public schools in the same area arises.

We understand that, while ACT Catholic school funding between 2017 and 2027 will fall from \$109m to \$107m, salaries and other costs are expected to rise by more than \$50m. Without a reversal of the proposed funding cuts and an equitable funding allocation to government and catholic schools in the same catchment areas, we do not see how the talented teachers at St Thomas More's and other catholic schools can be retained and paid at rates that will be competitive with the government schools. Reversing the proposed cuts will prevent a likely flight of children to already under pressure

government schools - and a resulting decline in the quality of the education they can provide to ACT children.

The catholic system is not a lavish private school alternative - it is much more an extension of the public school system that is subsidised by the catholic community and fees paid by parents. To stereotype catholic schools as elite private institutions who are taking money from poorly funded public schools is simply wrong. Instead, parents sending their children to catholic schools are subsidising parents who send their children to public schools, because we pay fees and so reduce the burden that would otherwise be met by the Government.

St Thomas More's primary is a small school with basic facilities. It does, however, have gifted and dedicated teachers who have a deep understanding of each child and how each child learns most effectively. Its school community is close and supportive. You can feel this when you walk into the school.

The Commonwealth Government's proposed funding cuts are risking this school's future right now. Already, at this critical period for enrolments for next year, the numbers of parents visiting and enquiring at the school are greatly reduced - because of the fear and uncertainty created by the announced cuts.

This is a wrong-headed decision that needs to be reversed urgently. We would encourage you to get the facts by visiting St Thomas More's - and Campbell Primary - and then acting by addressing the real needs of both schools fairly. We need fairness and security to be the result for our children.

It is impossible to explain to the students at St Thomas More's why they should have their education funding cut, while students across the oval get significant increases. The Bill's logic on this matter does not survive this simple physical comparison of these two small but quality Canberra schools.

We look forward to you getting behind the broad formulas by visiting both schools and getting a factual appreciation of the perverse and inequitable application of the current Bill's generic formulae.

Thank you for the opportunity to bring the practical effect of the proposed Bill on our children's education to your attention. We look forward to your report in mid June.

Yours sincerely,

Margaret Deerain and Michael Shoebridge.

24 May 2017