

INQUIRY BY SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE INTO ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Submission by Australian Secondary Principals Association Inc

Introduction:

The Australian Secondary Principals Association (ASPA) is the professional organisation which represents about 1900 leaders in government secondary schools across the nation. It operates through affiliates in each of the eight states and territories. ASPA's elected leaders are in daily touch with the realities of school operations across their jurisdictions. They are in frequent contact with departmental officers and other stakeholders such as parents' groups.

ASPA thanks the Committee for the opportunity to make a submission on the issue of academic freedom. It understands that the prime focus of the reference to the Committee related to universities and other tertiary institutions. Apparently there have been some complaints of bias among some members of university staff in their presentations to students. However it understands that questions have been raised as to whether similar complaints have been experienced in secondary schools and if so how they are dealt with.

Response:

1. ASPA's view is that this is not a major issue in government secondary schools. It is not aware that there have been significant numbers of complaints of bias by teachers performing their professional duties.
2. Government school systems in all jurisdictions have policies in place to deal with controversial issues, and principals are bound by these policies and have procedures in place to ensure that there is balance, especially when there is external input into lessons (from political parties, religious groups etc).
3. It believes that if complaints about bias are made at a school they would normally be dealt with by appropriate investigation and if sustained, counselling of the staff member involved at the school level by the Principal or a senior staff member designated by the Principal.
4. If the complaint is made to a departmental office in the first instance it would be referred to the Principal of the teacher involved and dealt with as outlined above.
5. ASPA believes all jurisdictions have processes for dealing with more serious teacher discipline matters. These are invoked where processes at the school level are unsuccessful, where allegations are of a more serious nature, or where there are repeat complaints.
6. ASPA is aware that many Principals believe these processes are difficult and cumbersome and that often matters can take many months or even years to be finalised. However it emphasises that cases involving allegations of bias – whether political, religious or racial – are very rare. Of these few, if any would involve any type of formal discipline process.
7. ASPA contends that often allegations of bias could more accurately be described as teaching techniques designed to encourage debate, critical thinking and differing aspects of issues. It believes secondary students can readily distinguish between challenging teaching techniques and bias. Indeed it is often the case that they can handle these issues as well as or even better than many of their parents.
8. As members of the Committee would be very aware bias is very much the perception of an individual. Often in the educational field issues and concepts are interpreted in an individual way. Students will be encouraged and assisted to challenge their own perspectives and perceptions. A skilled and experienced teacher will use a variety of methods to do this. At first sight their presentations may appear biased but on reflection will be seen to be what they were intended to be – strategies designed to teach critical and logical thinking skills.

Andrew Blair

National President

