



# **Australian Parents Council**

**Submission to:**

**Select Committee into the Abbott  
Government's Budget Cuts**

**22 August 2014**



## Introduction

The Australian Parents Council is the national organisation representing the parents of students attending non-government schools. While our focus is on representing the parents of students who attend independent and Catholic schools we have a deep interest in the education and wellbeing of all young Australians. This extends down to early childhood education and care, and up to youth transition.

Many Australian families are doing it tough in the current economic climate, and it is expected that the numbers will grow with rising unemployment and proposed changes to tax benefits, unemployment benefits, etc. While there are many things we might comment on in relation to the May 2014 Federal Budget, our submission focuses upon five issues summarised below.

## Summary

- I. Students with Disability - the funding for students with disabilities continues to be grossly inadequate. The anomaly whereby students with disabilities attending non-government mainstream and special schools continue receive only a small proportion of the funding they need and have been promised must be urgently resolved.
- II. Parent engagement – this vital pillar of the Students First education policy must be supported by a level of resourcing that is consistent with its potential to achieve improvement in student outcomes. Government funding allocated to it must be systematic in focus, tied to the established evidence base and have a high level of transparency and accountability.
- III. Funding for schooling - a strategic audit of how loadings funding is applied should be put in place, at least in the early years of implementing the new funding model for schooling, to assure parents and the wider community that there is efficacy of funding delivery through strong transparency and accountability measures.
- IV. Youth attainment & transitions – ongoing funding of the ‘My Future’ website and ‘Jobs Guide’ is crucial to support young people and their parents as they make the transition into tertiary education, training and/or the workforce. These resources and services have proved critical, particularly in rural and remote settings where no viable alternatives exist for young people and their parents.
- V. Tuition subsidies – the move to extend the demand-driven funding model for higher education is supported providing it results in the expansion of eligibility for government funded tuition subsidies in non-university settings, particularly in regional areas.

## Students with Disability

The needs aspect for children with disabilities is still on the backburner although multiple reports over the past 10 years have asserted that at least three times the average cost of schooling a student in a mainstream school is required to educate a student with disabilities. The recommendation of the Gonski Review, that all students with disability be fully funded regardless of school sector and subsequent assurances from Australian Governments raised the hopes of parents who have chosen non-government schools for their children.

The decision of the Abbott Government to extend the More Support for Students with Disabilities (MSSD) initiative with its capacity building focus, and with an injection of additional funding was welcomed. However, the provision of MSSD funding is not ‘sector blind’, as the base amount upon which allocations are made to students in the non-government sector is less than that which applies to students in the government sector.



MSSD funding it is not addressing the underlying and ongoing extra costs in educating students with disability. The students with disability funding loading must be resolved quickly so that critical additional money actually reaches students to fund their required adjustments.

We understand that Price Waterhouse Coopers is undertaking work to identify the additional resourcing provided for levels of adjustment for students with disabilities, although where this work will lead is uncertain. It would seem this work is only examining the resources currently available rather than the resources that students actually need and no governments have committed to providing any additional funding for students with disabilities at this point in time.

The 2014 Budget failed to provide certainty of funding for special schools in the non-government sector nor did it address the anomaly whereby students with disabilities will receive no additional funding if they attend mainstream and special schools that are above the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS). There are structural issues with the SRS funding model which appear to mean that many special schools have been assessed as “above the model” and so will lose funding each year until they reach their SRS, even should Section 62 of the Act be amended in ways that we understand are being considered. The Abbott Government’s commitment to fund the SRS funding model for four years might also mean that many students with disabilities in schools that are ‘in transition’ might never receive their full funding entitlement if alternative measures are not developed.

Overall funding for students with disabilities continues to be grossly inadequate, a situation exacerbated because some states and territories are not meeting their obligations. Consequently, students with disabilities attending non-government schools receive only a small proportion of the funding they need and have previously been promised. This dire situation cannot be allowed to continue.

### **Parent engagement**

The Abbott Government’s inclusion of Parent Engagement as a stated pillar of its education reform agenda was welcomed.

The allocation of funding to the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) for the development of parent engagement resources was a positive first step in implementing this policy lever. APC has long held that a strong evidence base is necessary in guiding parent engagement. This alone, though, will not be sufficient to bring about authentic and systemic engagement.

In being named a strand of education reform, parent engagement clearly warrants a level of resourcing that is consistent with its potential to achieve improvement in student outcomes. Governments, schools and school systems need to invest in this area through the funding loadings currently being implemented. While in some respects we understand the Abbott Government’s desire to minimise red tape, we also believe that it is important that a high level of transparency and accountability be demanded in the context of the implementation of critical new reform policy directions.

APC notes that significant public funding was provided to non-government schooling jurisdictions to implement the transition from the National Partnerships funding regime to new funding arrangements, including the parent engagement strand. At the present time we are not seeing how this money is being spent or linked to parent engagement initiatives and programs, rather it would appear that, in some cases at least, what is being done largely consists of simply providing parents with information.

Simply providing such ‘arm’s length’ information to parents does not facilitate the systemic engagement required to lift student performance. It does not enable parents to fully understand their



role, nor build their capacity and confidence to foster effective engagement with their children's learning.

The additional money given to non-government schooling jurisdictions must be tied to the established evidence base and a systemic focus mandated throughout schooling if the extra money and initiatives are to realize their potential.

We look forward to working with the government to realise the substantial benefits that will flow to students and schools as a result of the inclusion of this evidence-based lever which will require the development of further work that will need to be done.

### **Funding for schooling**

In addition to the Australian Parents Council's desire to see a high level of transparency and accountability around public spending in respect of parent engagement, we also believe that there should be similar conditions applied to public funding directed towards meeting specific schooling needs through funding loadings.

Again, while not wanting to see schools get tied up in overly burdensome amounts of red tape it is important that parents and the wider Australian public know that funding being delivered through needs-based loadings is being deployed effectively and efficiently through strategies that can be expected to make the most difference.

A strategic audit of how funding by way of loadings is applied may be warranted at least in the early years of implementing the new funding model for schooling.

### **Youth attainment and transitions**

Parents play a pivotal role in assisting their children to negotiate the transitions between the stages of formal education and beyond the secondary years.

The [My Future](#) website and [Jobs Guide](#) and related initiatives have proved to be highly valuable resources for parents and students in their deliberations around moving towards tertiary education and/or into the workforce. Such information is particularly critical in the context of rural and remote schools that have minimal or no career counselling and support services.

Whilst we were pleased that the Abbott Government extended the National Career Development strategy, funding of these initiatives concludes at the end of 2014. The vital importance of such resources and services for counsellors, parents and students means it is critical that the current review does not lead to lesser services or lesser quality of services.

If anything there should be an expansion of these resources and services as they have been, and continue to be, integral to student transition into higher education, training and the workplace, especially in regional areas. One case in point is a non-government school in Albany, Western Australia, which does not have a career advisor to assist their students and therefore all pathways and transition plans are made solely in the home by parents and students who highly value the availability of these resources and services when considering post-school options.

The establishment of the [Partnership Brokers Network](#) evolved in interesting ways and we are keen to see the current review find alternative pathways to deliver the outcomes that were sought through this program.

Interestingly, some Partnership Broker activity soon came to focus on parent and family engagement in whole school, community and home contexts. We were disappointed that this initiative was



originally designed and implemented without front-end consultation with the Australian Parents Council and the Australian Council of State School Organisations.

The Australian Government needs to engage in more formative policy design and implementation around parent engagement as the fourth pillar of education reform. While community and business might be very important from the perspective of potential sourcing of resources they have tended to take the spotlight.

Funding from a systematic approach must be directed to the more central value of leveraging parent/family engagement as a policy and practice lever in achieving improved student school participation, improved student academic outcomes and improved student wellbeing along with building the capacity of parents to constructively engage with their children's learning and with their schools and schooling.

#### **Australian Government funded tuition subsidies**

Based upon our current understanding of the issue, the Australian Parents Council is generally supportive of the Abbott Government's move to extend the demand-driven funding model with the intention of expanding eligibility for government-funded tuition subsidies.

We note that Australia has around 130 highly diverse higher education providers outside the university system and that between them they enrol more than 70,000 students. In the current economic climate it is imperative that training and employment opportunities are expanded, particularly if concerns around youth unemployment are to be addressed.

The rural and agriculture sectors provide examples of potential areas for significant and sustainable development through strategic government policy and budget measures. Opportunities for rural colleges like Longerenong Agricultural College to provide more training opportunities for students from metropolitan, regional and remote areas have to be expanded if the Government's agenda in this regard is to be realised.

#### **In conclusion**

The Australian Parents Council thanks the Senate Select Committee for the opportunity to make this submission and encourages the members of the Committee to closely consider the issues we have raised.

We would be pleased to offer further information about any of these issues.

Yours faithfully

**IAN DALTON**

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