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STEINER EDUCATION AUSTRALIA
Inquiry into the Australian Education Bill 2012

EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS COMMITTEE
INQUIRY INTO THE AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION BILL 2012

SUBMISSION BY
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1. Introduction

Steiner Education Australia (SEA) is the peak national body representing 35 Member Schools and 11 Associate Members across Australia. Each school is independent and autonomous with their own elected governing body. We represent over 7,000 students and their families, in all States and Territories of Australia.

Our schools are diverse, ranging from larger city schools to small schools in remote areas. Many of our schools are situated in communities receiving a low to average SES score.

Steiner education is an internationally recognised educational movement. Steiner Education Australia is also affiliated with the European Council of Steiner/Waldorf Education and the Federation of Rudolf Steiner Waldorf Schools in New Zealand. There are over 1300 Steiner/Waldorf schools and 2000 Early Childhood centres worldwide.

Steiner Education Australia welcomes this opportunity to provide comment to the Inquiry into the Australian Education Bill 2012.



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2. Preamble

SEA acknowledges the aspirations outlined in the Australian Education Bill 2012 for the future of education in Australia, specifically in relation to the quality and equity of schooling for all students.

We strongly recommend that the right of parents to choose from a range of diverse educational contexts and schools with differing educational philosophies be recognised and included in the Bill.

The overarching comment that schools will *need to adopt opportunities offered by digital education and new evidence-based methods of teaching and learning* is non-specific and causes concern. Although there is acknowledgement that schools are diverse, there is no guarantee or acknowledgment that schools with particular pedagogical methods and philosophy will be respected and able to work out of their own evidence-based pedagogical principles.

3. Commencement

The details of any proposed funding arrangements are still uncertain. As the current Australian Government funding arrangements for independent schools expires at the end of 2013, it is imperative that assurance is given to independent schools that they will be funded fairly and with the financial resources required to fulfill the requirements of the Australian Education Bill.

4. Objects

The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* are not mentioned in the Australian Education Bill, yet these agreed goals are those upon which the Australian Curriculum is based.

The importance of Goal 2; that *all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens*, seems to be significantly narrowed by an overemphasis on achieving international test scores in reading, mathematics and science.

Whilst the performance of students in these subjects is important, the high emphasis being placed on Australia to be ranked as one of the top five highest performing countries by 2025 is alarming. We have already seen the emerging impacts that high stakes testing has on narrowing curriculum, increasing student anxiety, lowering self esteem and having an adverse effect on student wellbeing, including the negative impact on families, teachers and schools as outlined in the Whitlam Institutes' research paper of January 2012. The evidence



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is over-whelming, yet the Australian Education Bill seems to largely ignore this research.

Instead, the preamble should identify the importance of high quality teaching and learning and the importance of positive student/teacher relationships. Excellent schools matter, the relationship between schools and their communities matter. The international race of test scores in three subjects provides a narrow scope for school improvement.

5. Definitions

This section seems quite limited in scope and does not include any mention of capital funding to improve current school facilities, nor funding for new schools.

6. National Plan

Implementation of the National Plan will be a condition of funding, yet the details have not as yet been developed.

Reform Directions:

Quality Teaching

SEA supports quality teaching and professional standards and suggests that school funding takes into account the significant costs that schools will be expected to cover in order to effectively implement the Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework and national standards as developed by AITSL.

Quality Learning

Steiner schools are committed to providing a high quality educational experience to all students. We have been successful in gaining ACARA's recognition in meeting comparable educational outcomes to the Australian Curriculum (*Foundation to Year 10*) for our Australian Steiner Curriculum Framework. We expect that any requirements in the Australian Education Bill would take this recognition process into account for schools with internationally renowned curricula.

Empowered School Leadership

SEA member schools value their independence and autonomy to make decisions and implement strategies to obtain the best outcomes for their students, school and local community.



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Transparency and accountability

It is of great concern that there seems to be even more demand for data. Whilst SEA appreciates the need for transparency and accountability, the burden being placed on small independent schools to collect and analyse data is unrealistic and underfunded. Sub-Sections 7 (4) and (5) lack detail and provide no certainty or limitation of data that may be required.

Meeting student need

SEA supports the high priority given to addressing the needs of students. We would expect the funding model to give schools the necessary financial resources to provide additional support to identified students. Much more detail is required.

Developing benchmarks and supporting improvement

The Australian Education Bill acknowledges the diversity of schools, therefore any benchmarks developed to assess performance of students and schools should acknowledge the wide-ranging scope and diversity of schooling in Australia.

SEA appreciates the importance of school improvement and the national plan, however this section lacks details of how benchmarks will be developed. SEA would expect to be involved as a key stakeholder in any consultation process, and wide-ranging views sought so that the diversity of the schooling sector is accommodated in developing these benchmarks.

School Funding

SEA supports the general principles as outlined in the Gonski Review of Funding and agrees that every student should have the opportunity to have an excellent education. We understand the huge nature and scope of the task of a national funding review and commend the Government in establishing this process.

However, the difficulty in finding agreement between the Federal Government and State and Territory governments has placed great tension on achieving a suitable timeline, creating uncertainty of funding for schools.

In Sub-Section 9 (b) the base recurrent funding formula is non-specific, yet how this formula is applied will determine a school's ability to carry out the expectations of the national reform agenda.

Sub-Section 9(c) also lacks clarity as the extent of loadings is not defined. In addition,



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support given to children with a disability will largely hinge on the national definition of disability, which is still being established.

If the Australian Education Bill is to achieve its aims, the school funding debate must be resolved urgently.

Independent schools are working in an atmosphere of great uncertainty, placing limitations on their ability to plan strategically for future growth and improvements. School funding must also include details of capital funding for both established and new schools.

The independent sector requires significantly more detail and consultation in order to model the impact that the future funding model will have on individual schools, students, families and communities.