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Supporting the Montessori Movement in Australia

Submission to the Parliamentary Enquiry into the Australian Education Bill 2012

Background

Montessori Education in Australia

The Montessori sector is unique, diverse and significant in Australian education, particularly in early childhood. There are currently over 250 Montessori schools and centres throughout Australia with diverse cultures and communities.

One hundred years ago, Dr Maria Montessori, an inspirational educator, developed a unique method of education, based on research into childhood learning. The Montessori approach fosters children's love of learning and encourages independence by providing an environment of activities and materials which children use at their own pace. This builds self-confidence, inner discipline, a sense of self-worth and instills positive social behaviour. The approach forms the basis for lifelong learning.

In today's world it is more important than ever that children become motivated individuals able to develop to their full potential. More than any other approach, Montessori takes into account the whole child and his place in the community, hence its relevance for today and the future.

Montessori educational programmes in Australia are offered for children from birth to three, three to six, six to twelve and twelve to eighteen years of age. Montessori professionals also work to support the needs of children outside the classroom setting, with a particular emphasis on parent education and community outreach programmes.

Montessori education is growing steadily in Australia. Community-based, non-profit associations run the majority of Montessori schools. There are a growing number of privately owned centres as well as programmes within public school settings. Montessori Indigenous learning programmes are also emerging, and Indigenous communities appreciate the fact that their own culture is respected within Montessori classrooms.

Montessori National Curriculum (MNC)

The MNC framework has been included on ACARA's Recognition Register along with only two other alternative providers, Steiner and IB. ACARA established a very rigorous recognition process to determine the extent to which a well-established alternative national curriculum can deliver comparable educational outcomes for students to those based on the Australian National Curriculum. The MNC aligns with the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, meets the particular principles and guidelines in relation to the Shape of the Australian Curriculum V3 Dec 2010, and allows for broadly comparable educational outcomes in English, mathematics, science and history by the end of Year 10.

The Montessori Australia Foundation (MAF)

This is the peak national body for Montessori in Australia. We are a non-profit organisation providing support services to Montessori schools/centres, teachers and parents. MAF maintains communication with all Montessori programmes across Australia and acts as a clearinghouse for Montessori information and communication. MAF also participates on an international level, particularly with initiatives in Asia (China, India, Thailand), and through the Association Montessori Internationale (recognised by UNESCO and the United Nations). www.montessori.org.au.

The Montessori Children's Foundation (MCF)

MCF has been established to champion the cause of all children, to uphold their rights in society, and to promote the Montessori approach as a means to achieving peace and social reform. An important part of MCF's work is to raise funds and allocate them to projects that are designed to alleviate hardship faced by children and provide opportunities for children to develop to their full potential. To date, a considerable part of our energies has been devoted to the establishment of Montessori education opportunities in remote Indigenous communities. A recent initiative has been the establishment the "Strait Start" programme, a joint initiative between the Torres Strait Islanders Regional Education Council (TSIREC), Tagai State College and MCF.

Response to the Bill

1. General

The Montessori sector believes that each Australian child should have access to a quality school education, irrespective of family background, location, disadvantage or type of school. Montessori schools can be found in both the government and non-government sectors and in remote Indigenous settings. Independent Montessori schools are not-for-profit institutions that are currently set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. These schools serve a broad range of students, reflecting the diversity of Australian society and enrolments include students from a variety of regions, religions, social backgrounds and socio-economic circumstances. This includes students experiencing a range of educational disadvantage including students with disabilities, rural and remote students, indigenous students, students from a language background other than English and students with social, emotional and behavioural issues.

2. Quality Education

We generally support the five reform directions outlined in the Bill (quality teaching, quality learning, empowered school leadership, transparency and accountability, and meeting student need. In addition, the need for “the provision of quality early childhood learning, development and care” (COAG, p2) is fully supported by the Montessori sector as world leaders in this area and we have given our full support to the National Quality Framework reforms.

For the Montessori sector in particular, we believe that the following points are crucial to quality provision:

- 2.1 The importance of well-trained practitioners who have the knowledge and ability to develop, implement and evaluate appropriate curricula (**Quality teaching**).

We would therefore support the acceptance of Montessori professional standards and best practice for Montessori teachers which is based on “successful teaching methods” (Line 28, p5, AEB)

- 2.2 The key role of pedagogies that facilitate appropriate, targeted and personalized learning and development experiences for each child (**Quality learning and meeting student need**).

The Montessori approach to education aims to provide children and young people, from birth to maturity, with learning environments designed to support the development of social, intellectual and ethical independence and “to reach their full potential” (Line 4, p6, AEB). Evidence gathered in Montessori schools throughout the world over the last

century confirms that children who have the opportunity to learn in this way become self-confident, self-reliant and self-disciplined, with a life-long love of learning and the desire and capacity to contribute to the wellbeing of their social group.

The Montessori sector is confident of its high standards, evidenced by the development of our own quality assurance framework.

2.3 Commitment to continuous improvement, leadership, vision and child advocacy (Empowered school leadership).

Montessori schools, in line with the independent school sector has a history of placing importance on strong leadership in the form of highly skilled, experienced and autonomous principals and clear governance arrangements which are focused on the “best outcomes for their schools and school students” (Lines 8,9, P6, AEB)

3. Transparency and Accountability

Small, community based schools such as Montessori schools show a significant commitment to transparent and effective governance with most school boards made up of parents. There is a high degree of accountability to stakeholders who are fee-paying partners, founders and other financial supporters.

The collection of data on Montessori schools should reflect a consistent approach when comparisons are made between “like” schools. We believe that the level of detail already provided to the Australian Government is of sufficient detail given the governance arrangements already allow for transparency to parents who are trustees of the school. With regard to collection of data on school students, whilst we have no objection to transparency of such reporting, there are aspects of the current testing regime with which we do not agree. In Montessori schools reporting is individualised, highly detailed, and focused on the strengths of the child as well as areas where further development is needed. Grading and comparative reporting, which ranks a student’s achievement against the performance of other members of the class, is not compatible with Montessori philosophy and practice.

Not only is comparative reporting often misleading for parents, and a cause of unwarranted anxiety, it is discouraging for students who score “poorly”, detrimental to both their self-esteem and their willingness to persist, as well as potentially negative for those who do “well’ by encouraging the valuing of high scores over the inherent satisfaction of learning.

4. Diversity and Choice

As recognized in the Bill, Australia's schools are diverse. Montessori schools reflect the diversity of Australian society and enrol students from a diverse range of regions, religions and social backgrounds.

We support the right of parents to exercise their right to choose the type of schooling for their children. When parents and staff choose a specific education for their children and workplace, **strong partnerships** are forged in an environment of informed mutual agreement on the outcomes for students.

5. School and Student Assessment Benchmarks

The Montessori sector has developed a Montessori Quality Assurance Programme (MQAP) to partner with and support all Montessori schools and centres to engage in a process of review, improvement and maintenance of high levels of Montessori experiences and outcomes for children and families. We strongly believe these benchmarks should be used to work with State and Territory authorities in order to achieve equity in assessing school and student performance.

We strongly believe there needs to be a method of assessing life cycle skill formation (Cunha et al, 2005) and well-being (UNICEF, 2007) as well as "reading, mathematics and science" (Lines 17,18, p3 AEB).

6. School Funding

The Montessori sector agrees in general with the principles expressed in the Bill. Key issues for the Montessori sector with regard to school funding.

- 6.1 Our key outcome for future funding is that no Montessori school or student should receive less funding in real terms.
- 6.2 Any model for funding of non-government schools should be equitable, transparent and treat all schools and systems in the non-government sector consistently. Funding arrangements should encourage, not discourage, parental investment in their child's schooling.
- 6.3 We concur with the independent school sector that it is critical that any proposed funding model be based on robust, reliable and up-to-date data.
- 6.4 In order to provide schools with stability and predictability of funding arrangements to facilitate financial planning and management, funding should be legislated for at least four years as per the current quadrennial arrangements. The value of

recurrent, capital and targeted grants should be maintained in real terms by appropriate supplementation.

- 6.5 We also agree with the view of the independent school sector that there are significant benefits for the Australian Government from its direct funding relationship with independent schools. Dealing directly with the Australian Government means that funds are used by schools for education purposes with little funding lost to administration and overheads. Utilising state and territory Associations of Independent Schools and Block Grant Authorities to administer Australian Government programs in the independent sector has also proved to be an effective and efficient approach to delivering funding to independent schools.
- 6.6 Any future funding models should encourage and support enrolment growth in the independent sector. Any reduction in the growth and contribution of the independent sector will ultimately lead to increased costs for governments. The contribution parents make to the operation of Montessori schools results in significant savings to governments, freeing up funds for government schools.
- 6.7 On average, 80 per cent of capital expenditure in independent schools is funded by school communities that represents a significant defray for governments. But despite this exceptional level of community effort, the future enrolment-driven capital demands on independent schools will not be able to be achieved without additional government assistance to support capital infrastructure development.
- 6.8 Lack of adequate funding continues to be a major constraint for Montessori schools seeking to enrol students with disabilities. Students with disabilities should receive similar levels of additional support regardless of the type of school they attend.
- 6.9 Funding arrangements must recognise the particular needs of Indigenous students and schools with large numbers of indigenous students, allowing schools to provide a high level of service, and flexible and innovative approaches to indigenous education.
- 6.10 As with the independent school sector, Montessori schools recognise the importance of appropriate financial and educational accountability. As smaller, community schools, many Montessori schools would like to balance responsibility to governments, the community and school with the need to reduce the administrative burdens on schools which appears to be increasing disproportionately to the funding available. Any proposals to further introduce accountability requirements for Australian Government funding that would increase this burden and therefore costs would be of great concern for Montessori schools that do not have the support of large bureaucracies.

- 6.11 Supplementation of government funding which reflects real movements in school education costs is critical to Montessori schools to ensure the value of funding is not diminished resulting in a decline in funding in real terms.
- 6.12 Montessori school enrolments are projected to increase significantly over the next decade and will be an important aspect of meeting the future recurrent and capital costs of school education in Australia. We agree with the independent sector that the Australian and State and Territory Governments must encourage and appropriately support independent schools to this end.
- 6.13 Montessori schools are chosen by many parents because of their ability to support students with special learning needs, including students with disabilities. These students must be appropriately resourced regardless of the type of school they attend. Lack of adequate government support for these students in independent schools is a major constraint on enrolment growth.
- 6.14 The majority of Montessori schools have less than 200 funded students and 38% of independent schools in Australia are in this category.
- 6.15 Montessori schools draw their enrolments from all income groups. Many of our schools offer low fees and serve lower SES communities that are the fastest growing group of independent schools.

**Montessori Australia Foundation
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