

**Submission to the Community Affairs Committee, Department of the Senate,  
Parliament House Canberra ACT**

I write to express my serious concern regarding the Government's proposal of tying receipt of welfare payments to school attendance. Needless to say it is imperative that children attend school and I appreciate the Federal Government's desire that this be a priority for all Australian children

However, I am very concerned about the effect that the *Social Security and Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment (Schooling Requirements) Bill 2008* will have on families. Some parents unfortunately simply do not have adequate parenting skills to ensure that this can happen. Many of them never received an adequate education themselves, and so do not have the organisational and parenting skills to ensure that their children do attend school. I believe that the strategy used by the Government should focus on helping them to improve their parenting skills rather than taking a punitive approach.

If pensions are decreased or stopped for these families, the end result will only lead to increased suffering. How will families be able to pay for food, rent and other basic necessities when their basic income is actually reduced? This will only lead to further disadvantage and suffering, homelessness and hunger from which poor families may never recover. Crime and domestic violence will escalate.

Many families whose children are not in the habit of regular school attendance simply will not be able to comply. Others will comply for a short while and then the effort will again prove too much so that they will again stop attending. How will 'a last resort' then be determined? How can any poor family survive for 13 weeks when poverty is likely to be a contributing factor to the non-attendance in the first place? Poor Australian families need positive support in these difficult times rather than punitive legislation.

In the Northern Territory, there are currently also major problems resulting from the Intervention Income Management regime, with many Aboriginal families now displaced, and forced to remain in fringe camps in the larger towns. This also adds to problems regarding schooling for their children. The situation is also compounded by the fact that there are not enough schools, classes, teachers or resources in the first place for children to be able to attend school. The Australian Education Union reports that 1,400 extra teachers are required immediately. The Government has recently made a commitment for just 50 a year.

What a sad day for our country which has prided itself on the principle of a fair go for all, if this punitive legislation becomes law, when their entitlements as Australian citizens can simply be taken away. I ask that the proposal regarding tying of welfare payments to school attendance be rejected totally and instead a more compassionate and caring approach be taken by our Government to ensure that the needs of Aboriginal people, including the provision of education, be adequately and justly met.

Yours sincerely

Loreto O'Connor