

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

Re the Federal Government's plan to link welfare payments to school attendance.

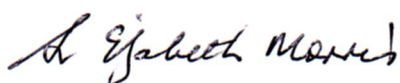
I write to record my concern about the effect that the *Social Security and Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment (Schooling Requirements) Bill 2008* will have on families. Yes, it is important that all Australian children attend school, but I believe the legislation is unnecessarily punitive. When families' basic income is actually taken away how will they be able to pay for food, rent and other basic necessities? I cannot comprehend what it would be like to have NO MONEY in a society which is fundamentally a money economy. An unfortunate, but obvious consequence of a short period – let alone the touted 13 weeks – without any income will be a further increase in domestic violence and crime. The poor will sink further into the mire of hunger, homelessness and suffering. Poverty is very likely to be a contributing factor of non-attendance at school in the first place, so I would strongly urge the Senate Committee to look at the causes of non-attendance at school and address the causes not the symptoms. We have a dangerous culture it seems to me, in our welfare system which blames the victim for his or her plight and we have little sympathy for the view that people actually get trapped into a cycle of poverty and disadvantage and it takes people with vision to help people to get off the treadmill.

Sadly, enforcing compliance with punitive legislation will establish yet one more layer of bureaucracy with consequent salaries of public servant staff, rather than channelling equivalent resources into positive programs of support. What we will see unfortunately is anything but the “education revolution” promised by the Labour Party as they campaigned to overthrow the Howard government in 2007. .

I would like to add a brief word about the Northern Territory situation. I am opposed to the NT intervention on many fronts, but this pending legislation re attendance at school will affect our Aboriginal children and their families to a much greater extent than it will the families in other parts of Australia. Already so many Aboriginal families are now displaced, and of course that means their schooling will be necessarily affected. In the NT moreover there are not enough schools, classes, teachers or resources in the first place. 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. I urge you to think carefully about the common good for ALL Australians, but especially the poor and the vulnerable.

Sincerely,



Sister Elizabeth Morris rsj