

A Submission to Senate Committee on the States Grants Bill

The educational dollar in this country is limited and so any bill that deals with the funding structure for the private sector will directly impact the funding of the public sector. We believe this legislation is fundamentally flawed and will adversely impact on the educational opportunity of the 70% of Australian students who attend public schools. Further the detriment will affect the tenor and security of the general population and the nation. This legislation needs to be soundly rejected.

The first flaw in the basis of the legislation is that parental choice means that Governments must fund all educational alternatives. While it is the parent's choice to use the private sector, it is not the parent's right to have this choice funded. The country cannot afford to duplicate resources and infra structure. We cannot afford to have two or more publicly funded systems. This legislation is entrenching the philosophy that the government should underwrite the private sector. This is done to "ensure the financial security" of the private system but ignores the plight of many under-funded public school. The government's first priority and obligation must be to provide a quality, well funded public system.

The second difficulty is that this legislation enforces the policy of government funding to all private schools with no restriction on size, viability, the population's ability to support a new school or the existing schools in the area. When these restrictions were removed in 1996 there was a proliferation of schools that all demand funding. This legislation assures this funding but it should stop this open pocket policy towards private schools. These funds are more equitably spent in maintaining public schools and giving them the resources to allow each student to reach their potential.

The cost involved in financing the establishment of small private schools is crippling to the government's resources. It should be noted that of private schools opening 1997 – 1999 funded by the Federal Government that 73.9% had less than 50 students and 88.8 % less than 100 students. ⁽¹⁾ This costs the public twice. First loss of numbers under the EBA system reduces our dollars for resources. Secondly two small groups uses more resources than one medium size group. (For example: 2 sites, 2 Principals, 2 sets of admin staff). When small groups set up a School, funded by the Government, it drains the public purse.

The legislation so institutes the private system that it fails to recognize the value of public education. Public schools provide not just excellent education to the individual but the foundation to our society. With in our inclusive schools we build a society that is tolerant, multicultural and where each individual is valued irrespective of their wealth, intelligence, race or religion. No private school does this because their very reason for existence is to select students on these bases. When a society provides access to quality education for all, it prevents ghetto mentality, violence and crime. We, as a nation, must arrest the defunding of public schools that this legislation affirms.

(1) "Trends in New Non-Government Schools 1997 to 1999" by Roy Martin AEU

Selectivity is ensured by this legislation. By tying funding to academic outcomes, the legislation ensures that private schools will select students that have the natural talent to perform. The private sector is discriminatory and so has no right to public funding. This means that the public system will continue to educate all comers and with a higher proportion of students who are more difficult to educate. At the same time the policy of the government is to reduce funding to public schools. Therefore there is a more difficult task with less resources to achieve acceptable outcomes. It is the governments responsibility to fund the public school so they can achieve the goals they are given. This requires funding which is being channeled to private sector.

The SES system is quite flawed as it bases its assessment not on actuality but on broad census statistics. A more accurate system would to be consider the real income and resources of the school.

Finally it is ridiculous to assure no decrease in funds to private schools. This ensures that they will only get a bigger slice of the educational dollar. Public schools are constantly facing cuts and reductions. Their communities usually do not have the ability to raise funds of significant size from other sources. This is not a new funding formulae but a guarantee to increase funds to private schools at the expense of the public system.

The Policy of the government, in general, and this legislation, in particular, demonstrates a direction which when taken to its logical conclusion is this: A broadly funded private system and a safety net, poorly funded public system. This will mean that Public education will eventually become ghetto education and deny this as a viable choice for parents. It appears the government intends to push people into private schooling, run the public system down and then reduce funding to the private sector as well. Thus the government will greatly reduce its educational expenditure. There comes a time when we must say no to such an erroneous and dangerous policy. Now is that time. Politicians who do not have the strength of will and integrity to oppose such a move, approve this bill at all our expense.

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Public Education Lobby (PEL) is an independent non-financial lobby group. The group is made up of parents, teachers and Principals who believe in Public Education. It has many groups throughout Western Sydney. We will make personal representation should this be requested by the committee.