

3 August 2000

Mr J Carter
Secretary
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business
and Education Legislation Committee
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr Carter

States Grants (Primary and Secondary Education Assistance) Bill 2000

Please accept this submission from the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) regarding the States Grants (Primary and Secondary Education Assistance) Bill 2000.

Summary

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC):

- Supports the funding provisions in the proposed State Grants legislation and recommends that the Parliament expedite passage of the bill;
- Endorses the Commonwealth's approach to the funding of Catholic school systems in Australia as part of the on-going development of policy;
- Supports the funding arrangements for individual non-systemic Catholic schools;

The National Catholic Education Commission wishes to submit the following views to the Committee for its consideration:

Catholic Schools

Catholic schools educate nearly 20% of all young Australians. There are about 1,700 Australian Catholic schools in Australia with nearly 650,000 students and over 50,000 teachers and support staff. These are distributed widely in every State and Territory and aim to provide a comprehensive, high quality education to a broad range of Australian families.

Catholic schools have been founded and operate on the principle of providing the best possible schooling, accessible to all, regardless of income, background or social status.

Catholic schools adhere to their respective State and Territory authorities' legislative and regulatory requirements, employ qualified and registered staff, and meet standards of educational and financial accountability similar to schools operated by State and Territory governments. Catholic schools aspire to be as comprehensive and accessible to the community as government

schools. The Catholic school systems, like the State systems, cater for children in diverse communities which are widely spread geographically and take account of both rural, remote and city populations. The struggle to retain a school infrastructure in declining rural areas has been felt equally by Catholic and government school systems.

Catholic school systems redistribute State and Commonwealth funding on the basis of need. This enables Catholic schools that could not operate as separate units to be both educationally and financially viable.

Catholic school systems operate through Catholic Education Offices which provide essential services to individual Catholic schools, e.g. professional development for teachers, school reviews, assistance with staff recruitment and placement, curriculum support, financial management and accountability. These services provide cost efficiencies, help to guarantee standards, and ensure that allocations from both State and Commonwealth Governments are made to schools on the basis of relative need.

Catholic school systems, like those operated by governments, provide a high level of educational service to the community. They do so at approximately 80% of the average government school cost.

In 1998 an independent, expert Non-Government Schools Funding Review Committee, appointed by the Commonwealth, recognised the widening gap between the resources and funds allocated to Catholic school systems, and the relative needs in those school systems, compared with those available for government schools. The Committee determined that Level 11 (under the former Commonwealth schools funding policy) was a more appropriate and just reflection of the funding required by those Catholic school systems. The Commonwealth, with Parliamentary approval, gave effect to this determination in 1999.

Security of Funding and Equity

The Bill has the support of the NCEC. The NCEC recognises that the Bill provides security of funding to Catholic schools and school systems over the next quadrennium. The Bill seeks to link grants for Catholic schools to the average costs of schooling in the government sector. The NCEC strongly endorses this. For Catholic schools and school systems, the Bill will enhance equity and accessibility for families who wish to exercise their right to choose the school for their children which meets their needs.

Maintaining the Integrity of Catholic Systems

The Bill recognises that Australia's Catholic school systems are diverse and, by implication, comparable in nature and range of services to government systems. The proposed means of allocating grants will maintain the integrity of those major school systems. It will support the role of system authorities in ensuring that school communities in most need receive the maximum assistance possible.

In extensive consultation with the Commonwealth on the mechanism for determining funding arrangements for Catholic school systems, prior to the finalisation of this legislation, the NCEC argued consistently that a combination of measures of need should be used. These include

recurrent and capital resources, geographic spread, the necessity to provide a wide range of central services, the socio-economic status of the populations served by the schools, and the need to make reasonable provision for the establishment of new schools in areas of need and demand. The NCEC believes that the proposal in the Bill to fund Catholic school systems at 56.2% of average government school recurrent costs is a very positive response by the Government to this policy position. The NCEC strongly endorses it.

Accountability

The NCEC supports the requirement by Commonwealth (and State Governments) for full financial accountability for the use of public funds by Catholic schools and systems. Financial accountability measures in this Bill are strongly endorsed. The NCEC wishes to signal its concern about the possibility of excessive and potentially counter-productive 'educational accountability' requirements resulting from this legislation.

The Future

The NCEC acknowledges and supports the funding arrangements in this Bill for Catholic schools for the forthcoming quadrennium. It does not regard them as the final position. It foreshadows the need for Commonwealth and State Governments, in combination, to make further efforts to help bridge the funding gap between Catholic and government schools.

The NCEC looks forward to the opportunity of discussing this submission and related matters with the Committee.

Representing the NCEC will be the Rev Tom Doyle, Deputy Chairman of the NCEC and Director of Catholic Education in Victoria, and Mrs Therese Temby, NCEC Executive Member, and Director of Catholic Education in Western Australia.

Yours sincerely

Dr P D Tannock
CHAIRMAN

Rev TM Doyle
DEPUTY CHAIRMAN

Mrs T Temby
MEMBER